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Issues paper

This report is for information

This report outlines the primary research conducted and evidence considered to inform proposals for the future direction of the Key Information Set and Unistats. It summarises the key findings from the research and includes individual research reports as annexes.

UK review of information about higher education

Report on the review of the Key Information Set and Unistats

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Annex A: Information displayed on Unistats

Annex B: Research on information use by students and their advisers

Annex C: First-year survey - analysis of survey responses

Annex D: Report on first-year focus groups by National Union of Students

Annex E: The impact of the Key Information Set and Unistats on institutions

Annexes are available to download alongside this document at
www.hefce.ac.uk/pubs/rereports/Year/2015/nssinfomap.

UK review of information about higher education: Report on the review of the Key Information Set and Unistats

To	Heads of HEFCE-funded higher education institutions Heads of HEFCE-funded further education colleges Heads of higher education institutions in Scotland Heads of higher education institutions in Northern Ireland Heads of higher education institutions in Wales Heads of further education colleges in Wales Heads of alternative providers in England Heads of student unions and guilds at UK institutions Employer bodies Professional, statutory and regulatory bodies Other bodies with an interest in information about higher education Careers advisers Schools, sixth form colleges and their representative bodies Other bodies and individuals involved in supplying advice and guidance to prospective higher education students
Of interest to staff responsible for:	Student information; Planning; Quality assurance; Admissions; Widening participation and marketing; Liaison with schools and colleges
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Executive summary

Purpose

1. This report outlines the primary research conducted and evidence considered to inform proposals for the future direction of the Key Information Set and Unistats. It summarises the key findings from the research and includes individual research reports as annexes.

Key points

2. The report presents findings from research conducted by the UK higher education funding bodies and, for ease of reference, includes key findings from research they have commissioned for the review, such as that carried out by CFE Research on information use by prospective students and their advisers. It also draws on evidence collected through interactions with stakeholders and users of the Unistats website.

3. The findings from our research indicate that, since our last research in this area in 2010, there have been some changes in the types of information of interest to prospective students and their advisers, and in the sources of information that they use. In particular, we have noted that priorities for information and patterns of information use are different for different student groups, but all have an interest in detailed information

about courses and first-hand accounts from current students. Some elements of the Key Information Set require significant effort to provide, yet are not always a robust basis for decision-making. For example, many institutions reported that they found producing data about scheduled learning and teaching in the format required for the Key Information Set time-consuming and complex, yet both their feedback and our data audits suggest that this does not always provide a good representation of a student's likely experience. This is primarily because it can be difficult to reflect flexible provision within the current approach. We also found limited evidence of reuse of the Unistats dataset by other providers of information for students.

Action required

4. No action is required.

Background

UK review of information

5. The UK higher education funding bodies are conducting a review of information about higher education¹. One strand of this work is to review the Unistats website and the Key Information Set (KIS) with a view to introducing any changes to these in 2017. This report summarises our evidence base for the review.

6. This report is one of a series of reports we have published as part of the review. Further information about the review is available from HEFCE's website.

Key Information Set and Unistats

7. The Unistats website has been available since 2007, but a new version with a greater range of information was launched in 2012 to coincide with the introduction of the KIS. The KIS is a dataset which includes course-level data to support undergraduate decision-making. It incorporates data drawn from existing national datasets, such as the National Student Survey (NSS) and the Destination of Leavers from Higher Education (DLHE) survey, and further data collected from institutions in a dedicated collection. The latter includes data on the proportion of time spent in learning and teaching activities, assessment methods and accommodation costs, and whether the course is accredited by a professional body. In addition to displaying the KIS data items for each course listed, Unistats includes more detailed information in each area, and provides functionality to enable prospective students to compare data about courses in which they are interested.

8. The site is funded jointly by the UK higher education (HE) funding bodies and includes courses from UK higher education institutions, further education colleges in England and Wales and some private providers. The information displayed on Unistats can be found at Annex A.

9. Development of the KIS and its presentation on the Unistats website was informed by a substantial programme of research and evidence collection. In 2010, in a context of heightened interest in access to robust, reliable information about higher education, the UK HE funding bodies commissioned Oakleigh Consulting Ltd and Staffordshire University to carry out research into the efficiency, effectiveness and use of existing public information about higher education. Their report, 'Understanding the information needs of users of public information about higher education'², identified the key pieces of information that prospective and current students considered important in making decisions about HE study as being primarily related to course satisfaction, employability and costs. It found that only a minority actively searched for such information, and therefore recommended that the way students were provided with this information needed to change, and its profile should be raised.

10. This research fed into a consultation with the HE sector, further user research, expert groups and pilots. The outcomes of this process were published in 'Provision of

¹ The UK higher education funding bodies are the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE), the Scottish Funding Council (SFC), the Higher Education Funding Council for Wales (HEFCW), and the Department for Employment and Learning in Northern Ireland (DELNI).

² Available at www.hefce.ac.uk/pubs/rereports/year/2010/hepublicinfouserneeds/.

information about higher education: Outcomes of consultation and next steps' (HEFCE 2011/18)³, issued jointly by the funding bodies, Universities UK and GuildHE about the provision of information in HE in June 2011, which detailed plans to introduce the KIS. Also published in June 2011, the Business, Innovation and Skills HE White Paper, 'Students at the Heart of the System'⁴, identified the provision of high-quality information in an accessible, comprehensive and comparable way as a priority for the English Government, and included commitments to develop the KIS and to redevelop and improve the existing Unistats website.

11. A further report, 'Early evaluation of Unistats and the Key Information Set'⁵, commissioned by the funding bodies, carried out by the International Centre for Guidance Studies and the Careers Research and Advisory Centre and published in May 2013, showed that the Unistats website was generally well used and recognised as a useful and usable comparison site which could support users' higher education choices, but that there was scope for improved brand recognition and market penetration. The report made a number of recommendations about the design and functionality of the site, many of which have now been implemented, while other more fundamental questions were deferred until the broader review.

Approach to the review of Unistats and the KIS

12. The aims of the review were to:

- identify how prospective students currently use information in making decisions about undergraduate study
- understand how Unistats is being used, which data items are most useful and where our current approach is not meeting information needs
- investigate the impact of the KIS collection on institutions
- understand the wider information landscape and any gaps in information or challenges in navigating the available information.

13. On the basis of our research, we are aiming to develop a future approach to the provision of information to inform student decision-making which:

- seeks to ensure the provision of the information that prospective students find useful in making decisions about their course, in a way that is accessible
- is sufficiently flexible to reflect the diversity of higher education provision across the sector
- balances the burden associated with central collection of information against the benefit it delivers.

14. We conceived the review as a series of interrelated pieces of research. Some elements of this have been commissioned from independent consultants; others have been undertaken internally. The findings reported here reflect the outcomes of this

³ Available at hefce.ac.uk/pubs/year/2011/201118.

⁴ Available at <http://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/+/http://discuss.bis.gov.uk/hereform/white-paper/>.

⁵ Available at www.hefce.ac.uk/pubs/rereports/year/2013/unistatseval/.

research, and also other work carried out and evidence accumulated through the lifespan of the KIS and the current Unistats site.

15. As part of the wider review of the provision of information, we commissioned two additional studies. While their findings are not reported here, they will play an important role in informing our proposals in this area. The first of these was an 'Advisory study and literature review'⁶ focusing on decision-making behaviour by prospective students, and the second was an 'Information mapping study'⁷ to identify the information available to prospective students and their ease of access to it, highlighting any potential gaps. This latter study included a sample survey of institutional websites. Both studies were carried out by CFE Research.

Research conducted

16. The methodology and findings from this research are outlined below:

- research on information use with prospective students and their advisers (Annex B)
- research with first-year students (Annexes C and D)
- impact of KIS and Unistats on institutions (Annex E)
- other evidence.

Research on information use with prospective students and their advisers

17. We commissioned CFE Research to investigate information use by prospective students, careers advisers, teachers and parents, including considering usage of the Unistats website by these groups. They carried out their research between May and July 2015 through online surveys and phone interviews.

18. The aim of the study was to establish what information and which information sources were considered most important by each group, and what role, if any, Unistats had played for them. It also explored how easy it was to find information, and whether there was any information participants had sought which they were unable to find. It also considered some of the behavioural factors which influence information use.

19. CFE received 485 survey responses from prospective students, spanning a range of demographic characteristics, modes of study and types of institution, and 92 from teachers and advisers. The findings from the surveys were supplemented by in-depth interviews with 20 prospective students, 17 parents and 17 teachers and advisers which were used to explore more fully considerations relating to their information use, and any differences in what these groups find useful and the way in which they access information.

20. CFE's report, 'Research on information use by students and their advisers', is attached at Annex B.

⁶ www.hefce.ac.uk/pubs/rereports/year/2014/infoadvisory/

⁷ www.hefce.ac.uk/lt/roiconsult/ra

Research with first-year students

21. The National Union of Students (NUS) conducted research on our behalf with first-year students to explore what information they had used when making decisions about their undergraduate course and what they had found most useful. They were also asked specifically to reflect on what information they did not look for that they might have found useful in the context of their experience of their course to date. (This might be to help them choose the right course or to help them understand what their experience would be like.)

22. The research was conducted through an online survey run in March 2015, to which 1,175 students responded, followed by a series of five online focus groups held in May 2015 to explore questions not easily addressed through a survey. Online focus groups were used as they allowed for the involvement of participants from across the UK, and because the relative anonymity compared with focus groups conducted in person has been found to facilitate an open and honest discussion. In addition to looking at information used in course decisions generally, this research sought feedback specifically on the Unistats website.

23. Our analysis of survey responses is attached at Annex C, and the NUS report on the focus groups is attached at Annex D.

Impact of KIS and Unistats on institutions

24. As part of the review, we sought to explore the impact of the KIS on institutions, including identifying which elements of the dataset they find challenging to produce. We also explored whether they were using any of the Unistats data for purposes other than its publication on Unistats to inform student decision-making. To gain a sector-wide picture of both the challenges and any incidental benefits associated with the KIS, we directed two questions to all institutions that complete a KIS return:

Question 1: Some institutions report they have found the KIS challenging to deliver. Have you found any areas of the Key Information Set data particularly challenging or burdensome to produce? Can you please explain why this is the case and provide any further information that might assist us in understanding if there are alternative approaches to capturing this type of information?

Question 2: Are you using any of the data collected for the Key Information Set for any other purposes, such as internal or external benchmarking? If so, which data items are you using and in what way?

25. English higher education institutions submit a mandatory Annual Monitoring Statement to HEFCE, so we included the two questions in this data return, which had a submission deadline of 3 December 2014. The same questions were also directed to further education colleges that had submitted 2014 KIS data, in a survey on the collection which HEFCE issued in January 2015. Higher education institutions in Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales were contacted either by HEFCE or by the relevant national funding body. A summary of responses can be found at Annex E.

Other evidence considered

Reuse of the Unistats dataset

26. The Unistats dataset is available for reuse under an Open Government Licence, either by using the Unistats Application Programming Interface or through downloading files from the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) website. We were aware that a number of other information providers use elements of the Unistats dataset, and sought as part of the review to gain an understanding of its wider use.

27. As the data is available under an open licence, it is not necessary for users to provide any information to access it, but we hold email addresses for those who have used the Application Programming Interface and those who have subscribed to a mailing list to be advised of updates to the dataset on the HESA website. We contacted both these groups and asked them to complete a brief survey about their use of the dataset. We also held discussions with a small number of organisations that provide information to inform student decision-making, about their use of Unistats data.

Findings from KIS audits

28. HEFCE has carried out three cycles of KIS data audits, looking at processes and systems for producing the dataset in compliance with the guidance. As well as evaluating data quality, the audits help us to identify any areas of difficulty for institutions and seek to identify good practice which could be shared more widely. Findings from these are reflected in the key findings below.

Evaluation of the KIS widget

29. The KIS 'widget' is a small banner which we ask institutions to display on each course page for courses that appear on Unistats. The widget is used to display KIS data in context on institutional course pages (as our previous research found that this was the place prospective students most often visited to seek information), and provides a direct link to the full data on the course page on Unistats.

30. As part of the review, we checked adherence to our guidance on displaying the widget, and considered this alongside feedback from institutions in order to understand the role that the widget has played in referring users to Unistats.

User experience testing and user surveys

31. We carry out regular testing with users of the Unistats site. This involves observing a range of users (prospective students with different demographic characteristics, parents and teachers) using the site and explores:

- which websites they generally use to find course information
- whether they notice the KIS widget
- whether they have used Unistats
- their interaction with the functionality of the website.

32. As well as testing the usability of new areas, this type of testing helps us to identify enhancements that we can make to the site and has given us a good sense of how users interact with and interpret the data.

Key research findings

Information use

33. The research conducted by CFE found that, in general, most prospective students were interested in a common core of information relating mainly to their potential academic experience, but that there were additional items of information that were particularly useful to specific groups, and there was interest in the wider HE experience. This was supported by the outcomes of the NUS survey and focus groups.

i. Both surveys, and the research conducted following them, found that the most important information for prospective students was detailed information about the course. This included its content, the way it would be taught and assessed, and the amount of contact time students would have. Interestingly, respondents often presented contact time not in the context of evaluating what the institution was offering, but of what would be expected of them as students, particularly if they were mature or part-time students seeking to fit their studies alongside other existing commitments. Some first-year students also thought that having an indication of the academic challenge involved in the course would have been helpful.

34. Other information also played an important role for many in either making or confirming their decisions about where to study. In terms of employment information, prospective and current students were found to be most interested in the types of jobs that graduates from the course do, rather than the salaries they earn, and parents were found to attach particular importance to information about employment outcomes.

35. Mature and part-time students and those with no parental experience of higher education were much more likely to rate course costs and other more practical aspects of undertaking a course as important.

36. There is strong interest in having access to first-hand accounts from current or former students as a way of identifying what studying on a particular course is actually like. This type of experiential information was mentioned frequently in free-text comments in survey responses and during the qualitative stages of the research. While it was acknowledged that, in some cases, institutions published accounts from students on their websites, participants found these to be overwhelmingly positive and would have been more useful if tempered by less favourable views which could help to create a balanced view of the course.

Information sources

37. Both surveys found that the most commonly used information sources continue to be the UCAS website and institutional websites. Direct contact with institutions, such as attendance at open days, was often the critical factor in the decision-making process.

38. While the level of detailed information on institutional websites is considered very valuable, the focus groups conducted by NUS found that institutional websites are broadly perceived as biased, as their marketing role is well recognised. There was strong support from participants for high-level, impartial, authoritative information to supplement that available on institutional websites.

39. Comparison websites were found to be useful, but only 18 per cent of first-year survey respondents and 20 per cent of prospective students had used Unistats. This was generally due to lack of awareness of the site: of those who did use it, the vast majority found it useful. Often comparison websites were found relatively late in the decision-making process and participants commented that they would have been more useful if found earlier. As might be expected, the utility of Unistats was often reported to be to confirm and validate decisions, as well as for shortlisting possible courses of interest and contributing to initial decisions.

40. Use of online information sources was highest among young prospective students who were intending to study full-time. For example, the NUS survey found that only 2 per cent of those intending to study part-time used the Unistats website, compared with 21 per cent of those intending to study full-time. This suggests that those outside a school or college environment are not generally accessing these information resources.

Ease of access and understandability of information

41. The research found that prospective students often do not know what questions they might wish to ask in advance of starting their HE experience, and it is only once on their course that they gain a picture of which elements of their experience it would have been most useful to have information about.

42. The research with prospective students concluded that the majority of information they sought was relatively straightforward to find, although some of high importance to specific groups was more difficult. Some of the information participants identified that they wanted but were unable to find is, however, available. For example, continuation rates are presented on Unistats, whereas participants reported being interested in this information, but unable to find it.

43. Often the information presented on sites such as Unistats is challenging to understand and can be overwhelming, with users struggling to find the information that is most relevant to them. Our user testing has found that often users do not engage with the data as closely as we had expected them to, and do not read explanatory text – so, for example, do not realise when they are not looking at course-level data.

44. Careers advisers report that those who are less well informed or less confident, and particularly those without parental experience of HE, need support to understand information on sites such as Unistats.

Institutional surveys

45. 22 per cent of higher education institutions and 19 per cent of further education colleges reported that they did not find any of the KIS data particularly burdensome or challenging to produce; this included a range of small, medium and large institutions. There was a broad consensus that, although returning data for the first time may have been burdensome, subsequent returns tended to be easier as systems and processes had been established.

46. Among those who did report areas as challenging or burdensome to produce, by far the most commonly cited area was learning and teaching data. 34 per cent of universities and 15 per cent of colleges reported that, mainly due to flexibility of provision

or systems limitations, producing this in the format required for the KIS required significant effort and was not straightforward. Assessment and accommodation data were the next most commonly cited challenging areas, with a number of colleges reporting that accommodation data was not relevant to them. These responses are consistent with the feedback that we continue to receive from institutions.

47. Over two-thirds of universities reported using KIS data for other purposes, such as internal and external benchmarking, but much of this was reuse of NSS and DLHE survey data. A much smaller percentage (15 per cent) of colleges were using the data for other purposes, and generally for internal benchmarking only.

48. A brief report on the survey outcomes is attached at Annex D.

Key Information Set data audits

49. The identification of learning and teaching data as the area most likely to be challenging for institutions to produce is supported by the findings of the institutional data audits we have carried out. It is commonly found to be the most problematic aspect of KIS returns, with what is returned sometimes not actually reflecting a possible pathway through the course.

50. Other common issues identified in audits have been:

- incorrect or non-functional links to course pages, or to specific areas such as learning and teaching or financial support information
- issues with accreditation information, including accreditations being returned when they have not been granted and being omitted when they have
- KIS widgets either not being implemented or not functioning
- incorrect treatment of franchised courses
- missing links to historical courses, so data from other records such as the NSS is not pulled through
- errors in tuition fee calculations or inappropriate use of estimated fee values.

Reuse of the Unistats dataset

51. We did not find large numbers of information providers publishing data from the Unistats dataset. Some that were publishing DLHE data were accessing this directly from HESA, but the majority of respondents to our survey of those who had provided contact details to be notified of updates to the dataset on the HESA website, were institutions using the data for benchmarking purposes.

52. Feedback from those who do use the dataset supports the findings from our ongoing user research: that users find the data useful but do not always understand what it represents, and that its presentation often prompts further questions; also that an absence of data where publication thresholds have not been met can lead to a negative perception of a course.

The KIS widget

53. Over the last two years we have carried out checks on institutional websites to identify whether the KIS widget has been implemented and whether its placement adheres to our guidelines (for example whether it is clearly visible on the course page).

54. We have found some colleges which have not implemented any KIS widgets, and some institutions where widgets are not maintained so they either do not exist for newly introduced courses or are not functioning correctly, as the links to the Unistats database do not reflect updated KIS course references. We have found many instances of the widget not being displayed prominently on the course page, with the user sometimes needing to expand an area on the page that is initially collapsed (an 'accordion') to view the widget, or click on a specific tab which does not contain any other course information and is often unhelpfully labelled as 'KIS' (which we know is not a recognisable brand to prospective students).

55. Some smaller institutions have reported the widget as being difficult and costly to implement and some, particularly those whose data from the NSS and DLHE survey cannot be displayed because of small cohort sizes, have questioned why they need to implement it when there is little displayed on it. The report on the mapping study also challenged its usefulness as a mechanism for presenting data, as it is not possible to contextualise it, and this is supported by institutional feedback about the widget not indicating whether, for example, data has been aggregated.

56. User testing has found that many prospective students do not notice the widget at all due to 'banner blindness', or disregard it as advertising if they do.

57. User analytics tell us, however, that the widget was responsible for nearly 190,000 visits to the site between its launch in August 2012 and July 2015, which is around 13 per cent of total visits. The majority of traffic to the site is direct, but the widget accounts for the vast majority of those visits that result from referrals from other sources.

58. Also, our research has confirmed that institutional websites remain the information resource used most frequently by prospective students, so, if we continue to have a central website such as Unistats, we will want to ensure that links from institutional websites continue to exist to increase awareness of, and drive traffic to, the site.

Usage of the site

59. The Unistats website receives close to half a million visits each year: for example from September 2014 to August 2015 it received 481,954 visits from 263,688 users. The majority of visitors access the site directly (64 per cent of visits), with the rest coming from searches and referrals. As noted above, the widget is the most significant source of referrals to the site. Year-on-year usage is relatively static and there is a clear cyclical usage pattern, with usage peaking sharply around clearing and the highest sustained use occurring in September and October each year. This is consistent with the usage of other information sources used by prospective students.

60. Detailed user analytics for the site are published on the HEFCE website⁸.

⁸ See www.hefce.ac.uk/lt/unikis/usage/.

Conclusions

61. While those information items identified in our 2010 research as important are, for the most part, still considered important, this research has found that what is key for most prospective students is detailed information about the course. We will need to consider how best to ensure the provision of both detailed course-related information and comparable information of an authoritative, impartial nature in any future approach. We must also ensure that we take account of the needs of different groups for different types of information (for example, those who wish to study part-time, mature students, those with protected characteristics, and those wishing to undertake their studies in Welsh), and of the very individual nature of information use and decision-making.

List of abbreviations

DELNI	Department for Employment and Learning in Northern Ireland
DLHE	Destinations of Leavers from Higher Education (survey)
FEC	Further education college
HE	Higher education
HEFCE	Higher Education Funding Council for England
HEFCW	Higher Education Funding Council for Wales
HEI	Higher education institution
HESA	Higher Education Statistics Agency
HND	Higher National Diploma
KIS	Key Information Sets
NSS	National Student Survey
NUS	National Union of Students
OU	Open University
SFC	Scottish Funding Council
SU	Students' Union
UCAS	Formerly the Universities and Colleges Admissions Service
XML	Extensible Markup Language