

OfS consultation on Data Futures and data collection

This statement sets out our approach to the collection of data through Data Futures in 2022-23 and updates on our response to parts two and three of the consultation on Data Futures and data collection.

Background

The Office for Students (OfS) published a consultation in December 2021¹ on the approach it should take to various data matters. The focus of the consultation was on how the designated data body (DDB) in England, should take forward the Data Futures programme designed to provide in-year student data.² In particular we consulted on the nature, frequency and timing of data collections by the DDB to enable us to better achieve our regulatory objectives. We also consulted on a number of other areas where, at the time, we considered the amount of data collected by the DDB or the OfS could be reduced.

The consultation had three parts:

Part one: Approach to in-year student data collection. In this section we set out the background to the Data Futures programme. We described the current higher education data landscape and methods of student data collection. We proposed three alternative approaches to collecting individualised student data, all of which involve returning some individualised student data during the academic year to reduce the delay between the majority of students starting their courses and having data on them. We also included the then current Data Futures approach as a fourth, discounted proposal.

Part two: Other changes to data collection. In this section we set out proposals for improvements, including the removal of a small number of student and staff data items for which we considered there may not be a compelling reason to collect, possible clarification of data quality expectations, and changes to provider profile data.

Part three: Use of linked and third-party data. In this section we set out our proposals to continue to make use of data linking between individualised student data and data from third parties, and to continue to explore the potential of applying data science techniques to data collected through social media and other online sources.

¹ See <https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/consultation-on-data-futures-and-data-collection/>.

² See www.hesa.ac.uk/innovation/data-futures.

We published our response to part one of the consultation in May 2022 confirming that in-year data would be required twice each year from 2024-25.³ We have also been considering our response to parts two and three of the consultation.

Update and future plans

Since we published our consultation, there have been a number of significant developments in higher education in England that are likely to affect our requirements. These include the designation of Jisc to perform the information duties, our current consultation on a new approach to regulating equality of opportunity, and an increased focus on the costs of living for students.

These developments mean that we have concluded that we should not make final decisions in relation to the proposals in parts two and three of the consultation at this time. We are concerned that any decisions we make now would need to be revisited in the short or medium term as we develop our understanding of future data requirements; this would create uncertainty and would increase burden if we concluded we should reintroduce requirements we had previously removed. For example:

- A number of the proposals are particularly relevant to the regulation of equality of opportunity, and it would not be appropriate to reach a final view on these issues while we are consulting on a new regulatory approach.
- Detailed policy for the Government's Lifelong Loan Entitlement is under development and may have a significant impact on the data we require in future in relation to modules.

In addition, we consider that further work would be needed before we could make final decisions about some of our proposals, for example:

- The proposals on increased use of linked data requires further work.
- Any move from routine to ad hoc collection of some data items, such as relating to fees, must be strategic and must not inadvertently increase burden overall.

Reaching this view means we can confirm the approach to the Data Futures collection in 2022-23.⁴ The data model and coding manual for the 2022-23 return needs to be updated to reflect some pending changes that are not related to the proposals in our consultation. These changes will be communicated to providers through the normal channels on the HESA (now part of Jisc) website. In the meantime Jisc will publish a list of the pending changes and ensure that guidance is clear.

The data we collect is essential for our risk-based approach to regulation: if we collected less data, we would need to rely on other more intrusive monitoring approaches which would be likely to increase regulatory burden for a wide range of providers. We do, however, recognise that the collection and submission of data represents one of the main sources of regulatory effort for providers and we remain committed to seeking ways to reduce this burden. We will continue to work with Jisc in its role as the designated data body to consider our data requirements and to identify areas for improvement as part of the longer term delivery of Data Futures.

³ See www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/data-futures-and-data-collection-analysis-of-responses-to-part-one-of-consultation-and-decisions/.

⁴ See <https://codingmanual.hesa.ac.uk/22056/home/>.