UK review of information about higher education:

Information mapping study

Report to the UK higher education funding bodies by CFE Research

October 2015

Authors
Dr Abigail Diamond
Dr James Evans
Jonathan Sheen
Dr Guy Birkin

For more information about this report please contact
Dr James Evans:

CFE Research, Phoenix Yard, Upper Brown Street,
Leicester, LE1 5TE

T: 0116 229 3300   james.evans@cfe.org.uk
www.cfe.org.uk

CONTENTS

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report presents findings from a comprehensive review of online information about higher education (HE). The information mapping review builds on the existing evidence base and current research on decision-making in order to inform the ongoing *Review of Information about HE* which is being undertaken by the UK HE funding bodies. HEFCE, on behalf of the UK HE funding bodies, commissioned CFE Research to conduct this as a two-part study:

— An overview mapping and gap analysis of online HE information sources for students in the UK;

— An in-depth investigation of information published online by a sample of HE providers.

It investigates the sources and types of published online information on UK HE provision specifically relating to two purposes of information: student decision-making and quality assurance and accountability and covers information for current and prospective undergraduate and taught postgraduate students.[1] Where possible the research maps the information available against guidance documentation published by the funding bodies and by regulatory organisations such as the Competition and Markets Authority and Quality Assurance Agency.[2] The study focuses specifically on information about learning and teaching and the student experience across student decision-making, and draws on a number of critical guidance documents specifically prepared for providers of information. It has therefore not addressed all types of public information available about HE. Instead the scope has been limited to the types of information which would realistically attract students who are looking to make decisions about their HE choices. The aim of the research, therefore, is to provide an up-to-date overview of the student information landscape in general using a selection of recommended guidance material to focus the review on specific information types and categories.

It should be noted that the review of providers' websites was undertaken between March-April 2015, shortly after the CMA published guidance to institutions on consumer law.

The student information landscape: key findings

The review outlined a number of key findings which characterise the student information landscape.

1. **There is a plurality of online sources**

The review found that there are many different online sources of information available about HE, beyond those already produced by UK HE providers. In total, 43 different online sources of

---

[1] Information for learning and teaching improvement was not included in this study at the request of the HE funding bodies as this is being covered in stage two of the review of information. See the HEFCE web-site for further information: www.hefce.ac.uk/lt/roiconsult/about/

[2] This related to guidance provided by the Competition and Markets Authority, by the Quality Assurance Agency, HEFCE and the funding bodies and the Office for Fair Trade. See Appendix 3 for details.

information about HE were identified. These information sources available for use by current and prospective undergraduate and postgraduate students range from:

— Websites offering generic advice and guidance; to

— Sophisticated course comparison or decision-making tools that seek to inform and enable student choice through comparison techniques and innovative presentation of data.

We found that many of these information sources acknowledge one-another and a considerable degree of overlap appears to take place between providers of information, data sources used and how the data is presented.

2. There is overlap and re-use of existing data

Despite the expansive selection of different information sources, most use similar data sources to produce content. Information provided by course or university decision-making tools is often based upon one or more of a relatively short list of cited data sources, including:

— Key Information Set data (as cited as a standalone product);

— Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) student record data and headline statistics;

— Destination of Leavers from Higher Education (DLHE) data;

— Longitudinal Destination of Leavers from Higher Education (LDLHE) data;

— Higher Education Careers Support Unit (HECSU) employment data (as cited as a standalone product);

— National Student Survey (NSS);

— Universities and Colleges Admissions Service (UCAS) course data

— UK Register of learning providers;

— University World Ranking Data (e.g. Times Higher Education).

3. High-level information is most commonly presented

Higher education information produced outside of the HE sector tends to present users with basic factual course information and high-level statistics. In contrast to the broad information provided by these information sources, HE providers tend to present more specific information about the courses they provide, as well as practical and administrative information about studying with them. While it is certainly true that more contextual information is offered on HE providers' web-sites, our study shows that, at the time of writing, there are some categories of information that are either persistently absent from websites or are not currently presented in ways which are easily accessible for students. These categories include information regularly highlighted in CMA's guidance on information as important for students: course fee information, additional and mandatory associated course costs, contact hours and self study time, course terms and conditions and how to make a complaint.

4. **Clarity around student information requirements and regulatory guidance material**

Beyond responding to regulatory guidance which sets out institutions' obligations, effective information also needs to be based on understanding what categories of information prospective and current students might use; that is, outlining what they might find useful. Decision-making can be a very personal activity and HE information providers have a responsibility to work toward tailoring information provision to individual cases where possible – there is no real single solution for the provision of the "right" information. It could be argued, therefore, that the role of HE information providers should be more aligned to supporting decision-making by encouraging individuals to be more reflexive and empowered and helping them understand what choices are important to them, and why this may be the case.

Within this context, our review found that HE provider websites are good at providing broad information about their mission and aims, courses available and the services they offer. However, although reflective of recommendations across the guidance considered (CMA, QAA, funding bodies and OFT), this information might be considered as broadly marketing oriented, rather than providing the detail that prospective students might use when finalising an HE decision point. This more detailed information – course terms and conditions, additional costs of courses, the practical experience of studying at an institution – is less effectively communicated. Critiquing provider websites based on guidance recommendations can be problematic, however: should, for example, HE providers present information about a category not offered by a particular course (e.g. further accreditation or external regulation)? In other instances there is a lack of clarity about the level of detail required of providers: what, for example does a "good student experience case study" look like, or how effective is the communication of information through extensive pdf downloads? It is nonetheless clear that there is scope for improvement with regards to what and how HE providers present information and how they respond to regulatory guidance as a consequence.

Concluding points

This research has highlighted a number of key issues and points for discussion about HE information provision, and raises some new questions about how to refine and improve such information.

1. **Develop greater clarity around what information is, and is not, needed**

This review has provided insight into the significant scale and nature of online information about HE for current and prospective students. It draws attention to similarities, and potential gaps in the types of information available. Where possible, we have used consumer and regulatory documentation to inform the review process, using the guidance requirements to institutions as a benchmark against which to assess the information that is available. While existing regulations and guidance offer clues as to what sorts of information other organisations should provide, they are intended for HE providers, primarily, as course providers. It would be useful, therefore, for the UK HE funding bodies to consider more closely what specific pieces of information should be published by HE providers,

and which pieces should be made available by other organisations, whether this be the funding bodies themselves or wider information providers.

While it is likely to be challenging for all information providers to adhere to specific blueprints for information provision, it may be worth considering what best practices could be adopted by these organisations, and what further support could be given by the funding bodies to enable the best possible provision of information.

2. Consider the tightening of branding associated with official HE information provision

The review notes a lack of clarity about the type and nature of data sources used across some information providers, suggesting that more can be done to highlight the data sources used in a clear and simple way. This may even be achieved through tightening the branding of official HE datasets, to make it easier for information providers to reference data that they use. We would question whether students sufficiently recognise the Unistats brand and whether data should be labelled in a clearer and more transparent way to help enhance recognition amongst prospective students. That Unistats is the "official website for comparing UK HE course data" is key, and promoting this more extensively could help prospective students make more informed decisions.

3. Explore what role the UK HE funding bodies should have in the management and regulation of HE information provision

A number of key options could be explored that may improve the clarity and quality of information about HE. These options potentially sit on a continuum from developing a potential marketplace where providers are either: *more regulated* where the UK HE funding bodies control the collection *and* presentation of higher education data; to *more open* where information is provided in an open source context and the market is free to develop products with little or no regulation. While it should be noted that UK HE funding bodies in some instances already engage in activity across a continuum, the marketplace for the provision of information is likely to continue to evolve and it will inevitably respond to advancements in technology.

HE providers will increasingly be able to gather more detailed and sophisticated data on current students' use of HE student services and resources (e.g. libraries; financial support services; students' unions facilities; learning and disability support services; childcare and counselling services). The burgeoning volume of big data that HE providers will hold has the potential to be used as an effective source of information about students' experiences. At the very least it will enable HE providers to respond to students' needs in a more informed way. Potentially HE providers could use such datasets to predict and foresee periods of increased or decreased student demand for services and help ensure that they respond to students' requirements by providing more efficient student services. Clearly there will also be scope, following the collection of these big datasets, for the resulting data to be interpreted and presented back as information to prospective students. Within a continuum, such as that highlighted above, there is the potential for funding bodies to play a role in influencing how this process of data collection and subsequent re-presentation evolves.

01. INTRODUCTION

We begin by providing a summary of the context for this study and the research aims and objectives detailed in undertaking the information review mapping.

The provision of information about higher education

The UK higher education funding bodies, advised by the Higher Education Public Information Steering Group (HEPISG), are conducting a review of the provision of information about higher education (HE). Such information aims to support student choice, promote improvements in learning and teaching, and support quality assurance. The review includes consideration of the information needed to meet these purposes and how it should be provided and whether changes are need to resources such as National Student Survey and Unistats to ensure they remain effective.

Research published in 2010[3] set out the information that current and prospective students said they found useful to support decision-making about HE. This informed the development of Unistats and the Key Information Set (KIS). Unistats is the official website that provides information for prospective students of UK universities and colleges. The website currently houses a range of course-level information, including the KIS – which is a standardised list of 17 pieces of information. The KIS includes:[4]

— Student satisfaction from the National Student Survey (NSS);
— Student destinations on finishing their course from the Destinations of Leavers from Higher Education (DLHE) survey;
— How the course is taught and study patterns;
— How the course is assessed;
— Course accreditation;
— Course costs (such as tuition fees and accommodation).

Unistats data is drawn from a range of sources, including the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA), the Skills Funding Agency, and from HE providers directly.

---

[3] Renfrew, K. Baird, H. Green, H. Davies, P. Hughes, A. Mangan, J. and Slack, K. (2010) *Understanding the information needs of users of public information about higher education* HEFCE
http://www.hefce.ac.uk/media/hefce/content/pubs/2010/rd1210/rd12_10b.pdf

[4] https://unistats.direct.gov.uk/find-out-more/

As part of their review of information, in 2013 the funding bodies commissioned CFE Research and the Research Exchange for the Social Sciences (RESS) to deliver an *Advisory Study* to understand how prospective students use information to make decisions about HE choice.[5] Leading into this research, the fundamental question of how students make decisions had been largely unexamined by policymakers. Ultimately, by providing greater understanding of how and why prospective students make choices about what and where to study, the Advisory Study sought to ensure that the provision of information be better aligned to assist them in making choices that are more consistent with their own aims.

The Advisory Study provided a more sophisticated understanding of how information is used by prospective students and of future information requirements. It drew on behavioural, sociological and information theory to challenge assumptions that people make rational choices based on a systematic analysis of all the information available to them. The findings demonstrated that information-seeking is complex and dynamic, and there is the potential for individuals to be overwhelmed by large amounts of data. People use a variety of sources and methods to reduce the complexity involved in decision-making which means that there is no single solution for the provision of the 'right' information. The Advisory Study was commissioned as part of the UK higher education funding bodies' *Review of Information. Our* work, and the broader review outputs, has helped ensure that strategic decisions are founded on knowledge about the behaviours that influence the use of information, both now and in the near future.

Guidance on the provision of information for prospective students

As well as informing student choice, providing access to accurate and clear information is therefore critical for ensuring the quality and standards of HE and maintaining public trust. In 2012 the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) published the UK Quality Code for Higher Education (the Quality Code), which includes a section (Part C) on information about HE provision.[6] It stipulates that information should be timely, transparent, fair and accurate, and focused on meeting audience needs. It also states that institutions should have autonomy in terms of the mechanisms by which information is provided. In 2013 the QAA published a series of short guides on information for students and providers about learning, staff teaching qualifications, class sizes, student workload and responding to student feedback.[7] Recent guidance by HEFCE[8] for HE providers in England on

---

[5] Diamond, A. Roberts, J. Vorley, T. Birkin, G. Evans, J. Sheen, J. and Nathwani, T. (2014) *UK review of the provision of information about higher education: Advisory study and literature review* HEFCE http://www.hefce.ac.uk/pubs/rereports/year/2014/infoadvisory/

[6] The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (2012) *UK Quality code for Higher Education (Part C - Information about Higher Education Provision)* http://www.qaa.ac.uk/publications/information-and-guidance/uk-quality-code-for-higher-education-part-c-information-about-higher-education-provision

[7] See *Explaining staff teaching qualifications: Guidance about providing information for students*: www.qaa.ac.uk/publications/information-and-guidance/publication/?PubID=75; *Explaining class size: Guidance about providing information for students*: www.qaa.ac.uk/publications/information-and-guidance/publication/?PubID=74; *Explaining student workload: Guidance about providing information for students*: www.qaa.ac.uk/publications/information-and-guidance/publication/?PubID=84; *Responding to feedback from students: Guidance about providing information for students*: www.qaa.ac.uk/publications/information-and-guidance/publication/?PubID=201

how to present income and expenditure information also reflects the need for public accountability. Furthermore, the UK HE funding bodies have also provided specific guidance to HE providers recommending information for prospective postgraduates.[9]

In November 2014, the consumer rights organisation Which? published research into the student experience and value for money in HE[10] and in March 2015, the Competition and Markets Authority (CMA) published *UK higher education providers - advice on consumer protection law*.[11] This includes guidance on information provision to ensure that students are given the information they need to make informed decisions. It also provides guidance for HE providers and their obligations under consumer protection law to provide information in a timely and relevant manner. It is within this context that this information mapping review takes place.

The above discussion describes guidance on information in a general sense – each of the UK nations has also published specific guidance material for providers and for students. Although it is beyond the scope of this study to map the context of this guidance against information provision, the bullet points below offer examples of the range of guidance material on offer.

— **England:** As well as the recent guidance on presenting income and expenditure information (highlighted above), HEFCE provides a range of information and guidance documentation for prospective students, including on learning and teaching, performance indicators, student opportunities and access.[12]

— **Wales[13]:** HEFCW provides general information about HE on its own website, and has published detailed guidance regarding cost of study[14] and requirements for student charters and relationship agreements.[15]

— **Scotland:** The Scottish Funding Council provides information of direct relevance to students, including funding guidance, student support and the impact of funding.[16]

---

[8] HEFCE (2014) *Supporting public accountability: Presenting income and expenditure information to current students* Circular letter 06/2014 http://www.hefce.ac.uk/pubs/year/2014/cl,062014

[9] HEFCE (2014) *Guidance to institutions on providing information for prospective postgraduate taught students* Circular letter 10/2014 *http://www.hefce.ac.uk/pubs/year/2014/cl,102014*

[10] Which? (2014) *A degree of value. Value for money from the student perspective*. Which? http://press.which.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2014/11/Which-A-degree-of-value-Nov-2014.pdf

[11] Competitions and Markets Authority (2015) *UK higher education providers – advice on consumer protection law* https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/376780/Draft_advice_for_HE_providers_on_consumer_protection_law.pdf

[12] For example see http://www.hefce.ac.uk/whatwedo/lt/publicinfo/; http://www.hefce.ac.uk/whatwedo/wp/current/impact/; http://www.hefce.ac.uk/whatwedo/reg/register/; http://www.hefce.ac.uk/sas/nnco/

[13] Further information can be found at http://www.hefcw.ac.uk/news/news.aspx (Newsletters, new releases and events); http://www.hefcw.ac.uk/publications/circulars/circulars.aspx (Circulars, other publications and responses to consultations).

[14] HEFCW (2010) *Provision of Information for Students on Cost of Study* HEFCW

[15] HEFCW (2011) *Guidance on the Development of Student Charters* HEFCW

[16] For example see http://www.sfc.ac.uk/guidance/FundingGuidance/CollegeFundingGuidance/student_support_guidance.aspxhttp://www.sfc.ac.uk/funding/colleges/student_support/student_applications_for_funding.aspx;

— **Northern Ireland:** The Department of Employment and Learning Northern Ireland provides general information and guidance about HE on its own website and on NI Direct and NI Business Info.[17]

Project aims and objectives

This information mapping review builds on the existing evidence base and current research on decision-making in order to inform the Review of the Provision of Information about HE. It investigates the sources and types of published information on UK HE provision for the purposes of current and prospective undergraduate and postgraduate student decision-making, quality assurance and accountability. HEFCE, on behalf of the UK HE funding bodies, commissioned CFE Research to conduct this as a two-part study. The overarching aim of this is to present an understanding of the current sources and types of online information about HE through:

— an overview mapping and gap analysis of online HE information sources in the UK;

— an in-depth investigation of information published online by a sample of HE providers.

The study focuses specifically on information about learning and teaching and the student experience across student decision-making, quality assurance and accountability. It has therefore not addressed all types of public information available about HE. Instead the scope has been limited to the types of information which would realistically attract students who are looking to make decisions about their HE choices.

The aim of the research, therefore, is to provide an up-to-date overview of the information landscape in general using a selection of recommended guidance material to focus the review on specific information types and categories. Where feasible the study looks to identify any relevant emerging trends in what is provided but does not explore detailed analysis of specific activities. The study provides valuable background context concerning the following key questions:

1. What information is currently available to support decision-making and enhance the student experience, and what may change in the near future?
2. How is the information provided, by whom and does it meet suggested regulatory guidance?
3. Is there scope to improve what is provided through greater collaboration or coordination by organisations involved?

The method used to understand the information landscape is presented in detail in Appendix 1. It is important that this report be viewed as one perspective on the student information landscape – we have reviewed a small sample of HE providers across the UK and presented information in a comparable way across a range of information sources.

---

http://www.sfc.ac.uk/FundingImpact/Provision/ProvisionOutcome.aspx;
http://www.sfc.ac.uk/FundingImpact/Learners/SCQF/scottish_credit_qualifications_framework.aspx;

[17] For example see http://www.nidirect.gov.uk/higher-education; https://www.nibusinessinfo.co.uk

A note on definitions

We use the following terms consistently to distinguish between two main types of organisation. Firstly, we refer to universities and colleges as '**higher education providers**' (or HE providers), as this is the term used in much of the guidance literature cited in this report. This term is more inclusive than 'higher education institutions' because it encompasses alternative providers and further education (FE) institutions that offer HE courses ('HE in FE' provision) in addition to traditional universities. We also use the term '**information provider**' to refer to organisations that students use to get information about HE. These might include Government, the funding bodies or agencies and independent organisations, for example. Like HE providers, information providers are organisations that students deal with or seek information from directly. It should also be noted that higher education providers themselves are also providers of information. We use the term **'information source'** to refer to the specific name or interface of the information used – examples of information sources include Unistats, UCAS and Which?. In contrast, '**data source**' refers to the organisations and/or datasets that information providers get their information from (for example, the NSS).

In a few cases, however, information types do not fit neatly into either category. For example, KIS is a selection of information from a range of data sources (including from the NSS and DLHE survey) but is not itself an independent information source (this information is provided by the Unistats website). With these limitations in mind, these terms provide a useful means to distinguish the main roles of organisations involved in supplying and/or presenting information about HE. The mapping spreadsheet (Appendix 5, attached with this report) shows which data sources are used by which information providers and enables identification of common links between different information sources. This, in turn, allows identification of notable gaps where information provision might be filled; for example, by suggesting how a new relationship between data sources might be developed.

Structure of this report

Our report presents findings from the information review mapping activity. Although the study involved two distinct activities – an overview of HE information sources available and an in-depth investigation of information published by a sample of HE providers – the report presents findings across these two processes together. This is important in reflecting the relationship between organisations that provide information (sources), the data used (and any collaboration/overlap), and how HE providers interpret consumer guidance material available. As such, chapter 02 provides a detailed description of the findings of the review. Chapter 03 outlines the ways in which information provision for current and prospective undergraduate and postgraduate students can be improved.

There are a number of appendices to the report. These explain the work that has informed our study and from which the bulk of the findings have been drawn. These appendices are as follows:

— **Appendix 1**: A full methodology, outlining our approach to the information review mapping exercise and the review of HE provider websites and an identification (through the development of a detailed coding matrix) of any gaps in information provision

— **Appendix 2**: The sample of 12 UK HE provider websites and accompanying courses reviewed for the study.

— **Appendix 3**: The sources of each of the categories of information reviewed as part of the HE provider website review (detailing which guidance document each category is recommended in).

— **Appendix 4**: A review of regulatory and student support organisations.

— **Appendix 5**: The full information provision mapping spreadsheet, outlining the coverage of information provided by information sources identified through the research. This also indicates where gaps in information exist.

— **Appendices 6-9**: These appendices are attached as separate documents and contain the coding matrix, data analysed and gaps in provision for the 12 HE providers reviewed in this report (Appendix 6); a review of Wales HE providers (Appendix 7); a review of Northern Ireland and Scotland providers (Appendix 8); and an additional England HE provider review (Appendix 9). Appendices 7-9 contain analysis of additional providers – they form part of the general narrative of the reporting process (and map consistently across the general findings). The study does not, however, provide separate reporting on each additional appendix.

02. MAPPING THE INFORMATION LANDSCAPE

Here we discuss the main findings from the information mapping review. We present four main areas of discussions and outline key examples of effective information provision and where improvements are necessary.

Our mapping of the HE information resources landscape has identified a very wide variety of information available about UK higher education. The types of information available range in scope, and are targeted towards a number of different audiences. Our mapping process uncovered a number of key findings that describe the scale and nature of HE information provision, and offer insight into ways that information provision may be improved.

There is a plurality of online sources for use by students

Firstly, our review found that there are many different sources of information available about HE, beyond that already produced by UK HE providers. Following analysis using the methodological principles outlined in Appendix 1, we constructed a spreadsheet including a review of 43 different online information sources. These information sources available for use by current and prospective undergraduate and postgraduate students range from websites offering generic advice and guidance to sophisticated decision-making tools that seek to inform and enable student choice through comparison techniques and innovative presentation of data. We found that many of these information sources acknowledge one-another and a considerable degree of overlap appears to take place between providers of information, data sources used and how the data is presented.

OVERVIEW OF INFORMATION SOURCES

Almost half of the sources we identified were hosted by private companies or independent organisations, many of which exist primarily to provide information about HE. Relatively few sources are provided directly by Government and the UK funding bodies, but a number of key official sources are instead delivered by registered charities, such as UCAS, and UK Postgraduate Application and Statistical Service (UKPASS) for example. Table 1 presents an overview of the information sources covered by this review, broken down by the type of organisation providing the information.

Type of Information Provider	Information sources
Private/Independent company (19)	Compare the uni FindAUniversity websites FindTheBest – Compare University Courses HotCourses Milkround Opendays.com Postgraduate Search Postgraduate Studentships Prospects Push TARGETpostgrad The Complete University Guide The Telegraph University Education and Course Finder Times Higher Education World University Rankings Top Universities UKCourseFinder University Compare The Guardian University Guide 2015 Whatuni
Registered Charity (9)	Association of Graduate Careers Advisory Services (AGCAS) Best Course4me.com Education UK – Higher education courses and qualifications Graduate Success Higher Education Careers Services Unit UCAS UK Postgraduate Application and Statistical Service Vitae Which? University
Government, or other legislative body (6)	Careers Wales Higher education courses: find and apply My World of Work (Careers Scotland) National Careers Service NI Direct – Skills to Succeed Study in Scotland
Other (4)	Aimhigher Careers Advice for Parents Euroeducation – The European education Directory Parentadviser[18]
Funding body (4)	Unistats HEFCE – National Scholarship Programme Register of HE providers HESA
HE Provider (1)	Jobs.ac.uk

Table 1: Information sources by information provider

ANALYSIS OF THE CONTENT OF INFORMATION SOURCES

We uncovered a very wide variety of information available about HE within these 43 information sources. The types of information available range in scope, from general resources aimed at current or prospective students, to more focused information covering all aspects of HE study. To

---

[18] A new website *Study in Wales* (http://studyinwales.ac.uk/) has also recently been launched – because of the timing of this launch it was not included in the initial review of websites.

help us to understand this detailed and expansive picture, we examined each information source and categorised the types of content available. At the highest level, the following types of information about HE currently exist:

— information about specific courses and programmes of study;

— information about the cost of HE and the availability of financial support;

— information about HE providers;

— information about the student experience and satisfaction of students;

— information about graduate destinations and employment.

The sources that we examined provide these types of information to varying extents, depending on their intended audience and purpose. The majority of these sources specialise on a particular type of content, such as course information or student satisfaction. The extent to which information about the above categories is provided depends significantly on the type of source.

Two key types of information source

We identified two broadly distinct types of HE information source. These have arguably different key purposes and may have specific target audiences in mind. It is necessary to consider these two key types of information source to more closely examine trends in the type of information presented.

1. **Decision-making tools:** We identified a total of 24 websites that were essentially 'decision-making tools', such as course comparison websites or university ranking systems. Decision-making tools commonly provide or use course-level or university-level data to enable prospective and current students to make choices about HE.
2. **General information sites:** We identified 19 websites that provide general information that may be of interest to prospective or current students. These websites typically present information about student life, aspects of teaching and learning in HE and broad trends in HE or the graduate labour market.

It is useful to consider decision-making tool information sources as a separate group because it helps us to gain a clearer picture about the types of information that current and prospective students face when seeking information to inform their choices. These types of information sources are distinguished by having at least some of the following key design features:

— **Course directory:** decision-making tools typically provide a long list of courses, arranged by HE provider or academic subject. These often form the backbone of decision-making tool functionality and content.

— **Search functionality:** almost all decision-making tools provide users with the ability to search for appropriate courses or institutions. This includes options to tailor searches by distance, region and academic subject.

— **Ability to sort and browse content:** rather than simply provide static lists of courses or institutions, decision-making tools normally allow the user to build custom lists of courses for further analysis and comparison. This enables ranking, rearranging and sorting courses

by key attributes, such as fee level, study mode, subject, qualification and other key characteristics.

— **Ability to save searches for later:** decision-making tools commonly provide a registration system enabling the user to create an account, save searches or bookmark particular courses.

— **Use of comparative data:** almost all decision-making tools provide some data or information to facilitate comparison between courses or institutions. Types of data include factual information, such as entry requirements and fee levels, statistics on student satisfaction, global university rankings or graduate employment rates. However, not all decision-making tools will go as far as to provide descriptive information; some will only provide basic course information accompanied by web links to HE provider websites, for example.

While our mapping exercise suggests that decision-making tools provide a considerable amount of useful information for current and prospective students, it should be noted that the information presented about each course is delivered in a summary format, designed to be broad and easy to understand. For this reason, decision-making tools lack the more detailed factual and regulatory information that is more likely to exist on HE provider websites. Key statistics, such as student satisfaction with learning and teaching facilities at a given university, are presented as headline percentages or bar/pie charts, enabling the user to gain quick insight for comparative purposes. However, discrete information, such as additional course fees, optional modules, further accreditation requirements and the extent of student support services are typically omitted, requiring the user to visit institutional webpages for further information. Table 2 categorises the 43 information sources into decision-making tools or general information sites and outlines the general focus of the information presented. Many of the sites we reviewed cover information across a variety of audiences – from prospective undergraduate students through to those interested in understanding the relationship between a course or institution and how this links to employment opportunities (or *transitions into employment*). It is uncommon for a particular information source, however, to cover all types of audience. As such it can be a challenge for students looking for specific types of information to know which source might be most appropriate for them. It should also be noted that the two broad types of information sources are not necessarily entirely mutually exclusive. For instance, decision-making tools also commonly present general information, advice and guidance, besides more detailed information or comparative data.

Decision-making Tools	Information for...				
	Prospective UG students	Current UG students	Prospective PGT students	Informing further study	Informing transitions into employment
Best Course4me.com	✓	✓	✗	✗	✓
Compare the uni	✓	✗	✗	✗	✗
Education UK – Higher education courses and qualifications	✓	✗	✓	✓	✗
FindAUniversity websites	✗	✓	✓	✓	✗
FindTheBest – Compare University Courses	✓	✗	✗	✗	✗
HotCourses	✓	✓	✓	✓	✗
Jobs.ac.uk	✗	✓	✓	✓	✓
Postgraduate Search	✗	✓	✓	✓	✗
Postgraduate Studentships	✗	✓	✓	✓	✓
Prospects.ac.uk	✗	✓	✓	✓	✗
Push	✓	✗	✗	✗	✗
TARGETpostgrad	✗	✓	✓	✓	✗
The Complete University Guide	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
The Telegraph University Education and Course Finder	✓	✓	✗	✗	✗
Times Higher Education World University Rankings	✓	✗	✓	✓	✗
Top Universities	✓	✗	✓	✓	✓
UCAS	✓	✗	✓	✓	✗
UK Postgraduate Application and Statistical Service	✗	✓	✓	✓	✗
UKCourseFinder	✓	✗	✗	✗	✗
Unistats	✓	✓	✗	✓	✗
University Compare	✓	✗	✗	✗	✗
University Guide 2015	✓	✗	✗	✗	✗
Whatuni	✓	✗	✓	✓	✓
Which? University	✓	✓	✓	✗	✓

General Information Advice and Guidance Websites	Prospective undergraduate students	Current undergraduate students	Prospective PGT students	Informing further study	Informing transitions into employment
Aimhigher	✓	✗	✗	✗	✗
Association of Graduate Careers Advisory Services (AGCAS)	✗	✓	✓	✓	✓
Careers Advice for Parents	✓	✗	✗	✗	✗
Careers Wales	✗	✗	✗	✗	✓
Euroeducation – The European education Directory	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Graduate Success	✗	✓	✓	✓	✓
HEFCE - National Scholarship Programme	✓	✗	✓	✗	✗
HESA	✓	✗	✓	✗	✗
Higher Education Careers Services Unit	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Higher education courses: find and apply	✓	✗	✓	✓	✗
Milkround	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
My World of Work (Careers Scotland)	✗	✗	✗	✗	✓
National Careers Service	✓	✓	✗	✗	✗
NI Direct – Skills to Succeed	✓	✓	✓	✓	✗
Opendays.com	✓	✗	✗	✗	✗
Parentadviser	✓	✗	✗	✗	✗
Register of HE providers	✓	✗	✓	✗	✗
Study in Scotland	✓	✗	✗	✗	✗
Vitae	✗	✗	✓	✓	✓

Table 2 Decision-making and general information providers and the type of information they provide

NAVIGATING THE LANDSCAPE

It is positive that such detailed information currently exists about UK HE, and that it is straightforward to quickly gather up-to-date and relevant information about the sector in general. However, we note that in its current form, the marketplace for HE information provision is somewhat cluttered, which could make it potentially confusing for prospective students. This is primarily due to the sheer number of different access points through which prospective and current students can gain information. This view was strongly advocated through in-depth interviews conducted as part of this study (see Appendix 1 for more detail regarding the in-depth interview methodology). One organisational representative for example, stated that there is possibly too much information presented and students find it difficult to navigate through this noise.

> I think that sometimes less is more. I think that all the information that students might need is potentially available to them, but it's in the middle of so much other noise that it possibly doesn't get through to them [....] There are risks, for example, that some of the more objective information about courses gets lost amongst the more marketing oriented information about HE providers which is commonly available
>
> Depth Interview, JISC.

As a result of this plurality there is also a lack of clarity regarding which information sources are useful. As we have seen, decision-making tools share many common design and information properties and it can be difficult to establish the merits of one information source over another. Equally, because much of the data that such tools use is similar or from the same sources, it can be difficult to compare the accuracy of the same type of information which has been presented in different ways. For example, often instances of factual inaccuracies, as Figure 1 demonstrates, are present when comparing across information sources, even when they state that the same data source is used.

In this figure, the top statistics are taken from a well known course comparison site, while the middle and bottom statistics are respectively from a KIS widget on the corresponding course website which we accessed via the provider and the Unistats websites (which is updated on a weekly basis). The top statistic highlights use of KIS data, but the figure for coursework contradicts that highlighted using the KIS widget/applet and the Unistats site.
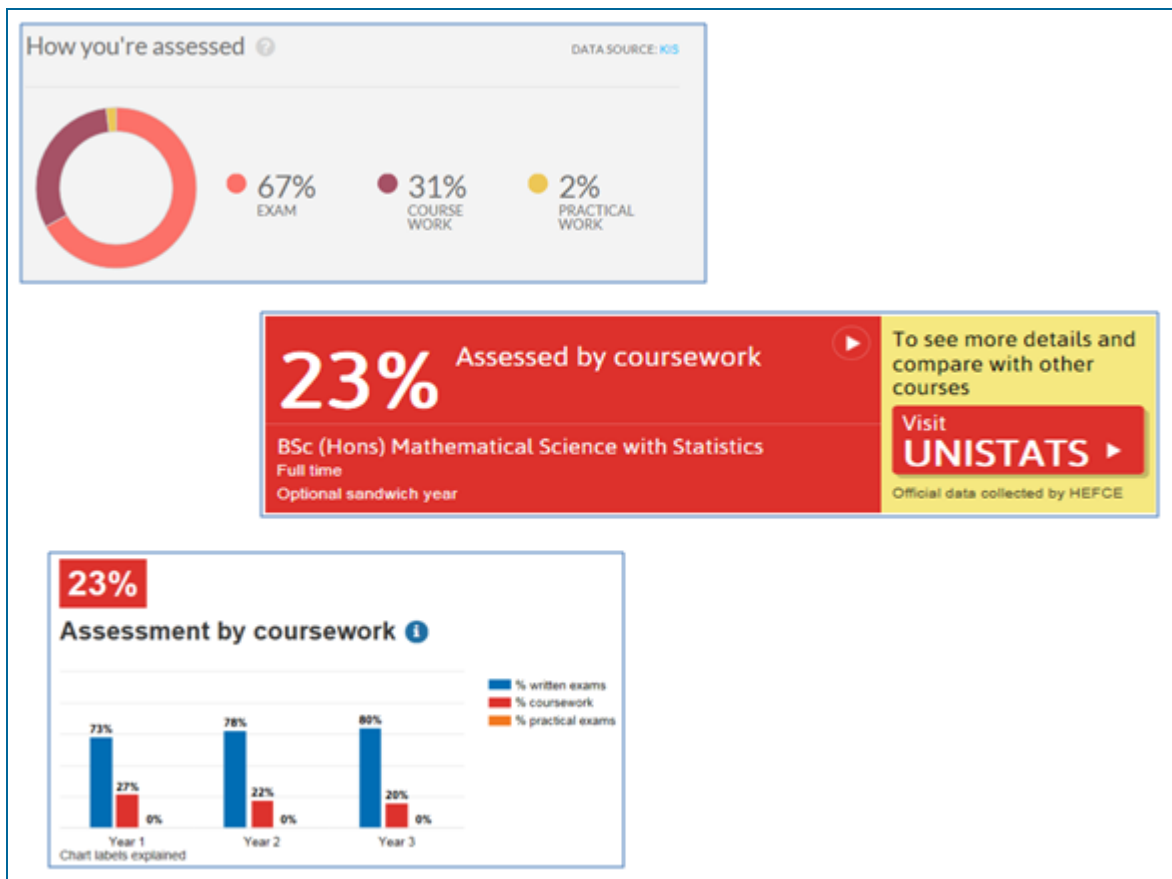
Figure 1: Example of factual inconsistencies

Whether the top statistic is actually presenting the information in a different way, or whether it is a genuine mistake is hard to tell. While this level of detail may not be critical for a current or prospective student in making final decisions about HE, it does highlight the problems associated with the proliferation of sites which use a finite selection of publicly available data to present information across similar categories in different ways. Previous work by CFE Research for the UK HE funding bodies has outlined that there are limitations to the amount of information-processing that people can undertake when making a decision about whether to enter HE and which course or university to attend. In this regard, more information about a topic or subject does not necessarily lead to a more informed decision. Our depth interview participants emphasised these points and outlined that for students to be able to use information effectively, appropriate information advice and guidance needs to be in place.

> The challenge for students is how to make use of the information and to understand how to deal with the wide range of information available. So it's not that there is a lack of information out there, it's more that 'is there an appropriate information support and advice framework' in place to help students make the most of the wide range of data available?
>
> Depth Interview, HESA

Our review suggests that, even though there is a plurality of information sources and a variety of access points, the data used by these sources is relatively finite. The next finding associated with the HE information landscape is, therefore, about the overlap and re-use of information.

Overlap and re-use of data

Despite the expansive selection of different information sources, most use similar data sources to produce content. Information provided by course or university decision-making tools is often based upon one or more of a relatively short list of data sources, including data collected by Government, UK HE funding bodies, HESA, and public and private institutions.

COLLABORATION OR RE-USE OF DATA ACROSS INFORMATION SOURCES IS COMMON

Many of the information sources listed in Table 1 appear to work collaboratively to produce or present information about HE. Almost half (47%, 20 information sources) stated a relationship or collaboration with at least one partner organisation. While a similar proportion did not explicitly state any relationship or collaboration with partners (53%, 23 information sources), collaboration may still be taking place between these information providers, especially where it is apparent that third party information or data is used.

Our mapping of information sources suggests that much collaboration takes place between UK Government partners, UK HE funding bodies (including the use of Unistats data) and HESA. UCAS are also frequently cited as a partner, and are likely play an instrumental role by providing database content for HE information sources that offer course-level information. Organisations such as these will often reuse data that can be re-presented to prospective or current students. In other cases, information providers may signpost their users to a partner organisation, for example through a link to another website.

TYPES OF DATA SOURCES CITED

The type of data cited by each information source varies considerably depending on the purpose of the website and its target audience. Examples of the most commonly cited data sources are listed below:

— KIS data (as cited as a standalone product)
— HESA student record data and headline statistics
— Destination of Leavers from Higher Education (DLHE) data
— Longitudinal Destination of Leavers from Higher Education (LDLHE) data
— Higher Education Careers Support Unit (HECSU) employment data (as cited as a standalone product)
— National Student Survey (NSS)
— UCAS course data
— UK Register of Learning Providers
— University world ranking data (e.g. Times Higher Education)

However, it is sometimes difficult to identify which data is used by a given information source. The adoption of the KIS seems confined to a small number of information providers, although many sources do use elements of this dataset in isolation to present similar information; such as that collected through the NSS or the DLHE survey. In other cases it is difficult to determine which specific datasets underpin a given information source. The origin of data is not always stated and it is possible that some information sources refer to the same datasets with different names.

Use of KIS: coverage

A total of six of the 24 decision-making tools covered by this review cited usage of the KIS dataset. While there is some overlap and similarity between sources that use KIS and those that do not, the KIS-based sources are distinctive for a number of reasons.

— **They generally offer a wider variety of descriptive information than non-KIS sources:** almost all KIS-based sources provide descriptive interpretations of summary information gathered through the NSS and the DLHE survey.

— **They all facilitate course comparison:** all KIS sources have a built in system for comparing provision at a course level, a feature that is seen in relatively few of the decision-making tools that do not cite usage of KIS.

— **They provide certain pieces of detailed information that are not commonly seen elsewhere:** for example, KIS sources often provide summary data on discrete issues such as continuation rate and future graduate salary. This information is seen less frequently in the non-KIS decision-making tools (although it is present on occasion).

These things considered, there is a great deal of similarity between the 24 decision-making tools, irrespective of whether they use KIS or not. As noted above, most provide broad data at a course-level, and there is overlap in the types of sources each use. The non-KIS sources that do provide course level descriptive data, such NSS or DLHE data, either do so through use in isolation or have developed another proprietary method to convey this information.

Use of KIS: data

Since KIS is partly derived from other datasets listed above, it may be either cited as a data source in its own right, or instead referred to by the datasets that constitute it. Six information sources covered by our review specifically cited KIS as a source of their data, but others have presented similar information and only cited some or all of its components (for example, the NSS and the DLHE survey). It is not clear whether these component parts of KIS are actually being lifted directly from the Unistats site or if they are being sourced independently and presented in isolation in order to present information that is not currently covered through KIS alone.

LONG-TERM IMPLICATIONS FOR OFFICIAL SOURCES OF DATA

The use and re-use of publicly available data sources is a positive outcome of the proliferation of information sources available to current and prospective students. It is, in the short-term, an outcome that students may not necessarily acknowledge as they access the various information sources. However, the inconsistencies in citing and referencing official sources of data about HE

potentially have a long-term impact on the reputation of such datasets. Given the importance of Unistats, KIS and its constituent datasets, more standardisation in terms of acknowledgement should be seen as vital, particularly as it can be challenging to critically assess the quality of the wide variety of information sources that potentially use, to varying degrees, various components of publicly available data. This report describes in more detail how this impact can be mitigated in chapter 03.The penultimate finding of our information mapping review explores the granularity of information available to prospective and current students.

High-level information is most commonly presented

The third main finding from our review shows that HE information produced outside of the HE sector tends to present users with basic factual course information and high-level summary statistics. In many cases key statistics are offered, such as those available through KIS, but this is always presented in the form of headline figures. In contrast to the broad information provided by specific information sources, HE providers will tend to present more specific information about the courses they provide, as well as practical and administrative information about studying with them. While it is certainly true that more contextual information is offered, our study shows that there are some categories of information that are either persistently absent from websites, or are not presented in ways which are easily accessible for students. The report now explores these two aspects of information provision.

COVERAGE OF INFORMATION CATEGORIES

Our review suggests that the broader the category of information, the more likely it is to be used for decision-making tools. Table 3 shows the incidence of different categories of information or data identified within such tools. The more specific the information, the less likely it is to be included across information sources. This offers some insight into the types of information available to prospective and current students.

Category of information	Coverage within decision-making tools
Course list information	
Course directory/list	83%
Entry requirements	75%
Applications and admissions information	46%
Module information	
Core module information	38%
Optional module information	29%
Course method of assessment	17%
Fee information	
Fees/funding	71%
Is financial support available?	63%
Additional fees (trips, materials etc)	21%
When fees are payable?	21%
Continuation and destination information	
Employment/destination	33%
Continuation rate	21%
Experience information	
Learning and teaching arrangements	42%
Student experience/satisfaction	42%
Facilities available (libraries, learning facilities)	8%
Information about advisory services	8%
Self-study hours	4%
Quality of learning and teaching	0%
Complaints procedures	0%

Table 3 Categories of information presented by decision-making tools

Undergraduate and postgraduate coverage

Looking across all information sources identified, there is a roughly even volume of information available for prospective undergraduate students, current students, and prospective postgraduate taught students. However, there are some key differences in the categories of information provided by information sources that are solely aimed at either undergraduate or postgraduate students. Focusing on decision-making tools only, it is immediately apparent that sources aimed only at postgraduate students do not provide data around student satisfaction or graduate destinations, and do not provide a means of comparing HE providers. Table 4 provides simple frequencies to show the incidence of these information types available to these two key audiences.

Broad information category	Undergraduate only (9)	Postgraduate only (7)
Course directory/list	8	6
Entry requirements	7	6
Fees/funding information	5	5
Whether financial support is available	5	4
Course comparison	7	1
University comparison	6	0
Student experience/satisfaction rates	6	0
Employment/destination information	5	0
Continuation rates	3	0

Table 4 Frequency of broad categories provided by decision-making tools with an undergraduate or postgraduate focus

It is, of course, likely that the level of information provided for prospective undergraduate students is higher than for prospective postgraduate students. This is also likely the case when comparing undergraduate and postgraduate information on HE provider websites. For example, there is no comparable data source concerning student satisfaction for postgraduate students, and KIS data is currently provided for undergraduate courses only. The relative lack of descriptive data for postgraduate students may also be a reflection of the differing nature of postgraduate course selection and application. Course-level information about postgraduate courses, for example, typically covers less information beyond the general course description, fees and award, and is more likely to request that prospective students make enquiries about the course directly to the university department offering the course. It is worth considering whether further information would be useful to prospective postgraduate students, or whether similar course-comparison statistics could be presented to facilitate student choice in this area.[19]

INFORMATION PUBLISHED BY HE PROVIDERS

As highlighted above, broader information is generally provided by these information sources, leaving more detailed course specific information to be presented by HE providers themselves. However, our review found that, using a systematic categorisation of coverage, this level of detail is not always present on HE provider websites[20]. In this regard, there is inconsistency in the quality and coverage of information available to students. Below we provide three key examples of this balance between general information about HE study and detailed course specific information provided by HE provider websites, and where specific issues lie. It is important to highlight here that there is guidance both from CMA and from QAA regarding the types and categories of information that HE providers should provide for current and prospective students. Whilst it is not a

---

[19] The UK HE funding bodies have developed a web-site 'Steps to Postgraduate study' to help postgraduate students make informed decisions.

[20] In the review a category was assessed as having:

— 'Good' coverage if it is presented on more than 75% of provider websites;

— 'Average' coverage if it is presented on fewer than 75% but more than 25% of provider websites;

— 'Poor' coverage if it is presented on fewer than 25% of provider websites

legal requirement for providers to present information across all categories, the examples below pinpoint specific concerns with the scope and accessibility of certain types of information. It should also be noted that these examples are illustrative, and more information about these providers, categories and courses can be found in Appendices 1, 2 and 5.

Example 1: University mission statements and learning and teaching requirements

HE providers offer a good description of their mission, for both undergraduate and postgraduate students. This category is often the first piece of information a prospective student will identify when beginning a search and the detail regarding mission, ethos and purpose is clear and explicit. Within this, HE providers are consistently good at providing general information about *learning support requirements*, *facilities available* and *information about advisory services*. These categories often highlight the potential quality of student experience and providers seem particularly good at describing these in detail.

Within this broad category of learning and teaching requirements there are, however, many instances where information about a specific category may be presented, but is not explicitly or quantitatively described. For example, with reference to *contact hours* and *self study time*, providers offer a mix of information. For some, a broad description of the importance of *self study time* is often available but in many cases with no specific hours mentioned. Similarly, for others, there might be a substantial amount of information presented, to the level of offering the number of *contact hours* and *self study time* expected per unit of module. Such differences in descriptions occur within the following categories, for example: *location of study*, *methods of assessment* and *staff experience*. Providers, therefore, do mostly offer information about learning and teaching, but the explicit nature of this varies considerably.

Example 2: Course entry requirements

Course searches vary more in scope and quality across HE providers. As might be expected, all providers offer good coverage of the courses they offer in the form of A-Z lists. It is clear, though, that the more detailed the search the more likely there are to be gaps in information. For example, few providers offer *course title clustering* or *broader subject group clustering,* while even fewer offer *career sector clustering* and *study mode clustering.* For these last two categories undergraduate coverage is better than postgraduate coverage (surprising due to the often vocational nature of postgraduate study).

Course specific entry requirements (and whether modules are compulsory or modular) and *details about the application and admissions process* are well covered across the provider course reviews. These are critical elements for prospective students (both undergraduate and postgraduate) and are perhaps not surprising. Those providers who offer the clearest information will in most cases provide information about the application process (as well as tuition fees for that course) on course specific webpages, or at least very clearly highlight where this information can be found. Less effective are those providers that present this information on a variety of different webpages, which involves a degree of navigation around their websites.

Provider websites are, however, less clear about *non-academic entry requirements*. This could be because it is not necessarily clear what is meant by a 'non-academic entry requirement' in guidance material. In the Competition and Markets Authority (CMA) 2015 guidance documentation, *UK higher education providers – advice on consumer protection law*, this recommendation is described as 'entry requirements/criteria (both academic and non-academic), and an indication of the standard/typical offer level criteria' (p. 25). Some provider postgraduate courses highlight professional experience, for example, as an entry requirement if qualification criteria are not met, but whether this is classified as non-academic is ambiguous. For undergraduates there is a lack of clarity around whether voluntary work, social and community club activity, or indeed gap-year activity, could have a role to play in undergraduate entry. For the arts-based subjects reviewed, a portfolio of work is deemed a necessary requirement for review prior to being offered a place: this is broadly academic in nature, but may well have components built from general interest or wider experience.

Example 3: Course costs and university fees

Example 3 provides the most explicit case of where the balance between general and specific information is most problematic. *General fee information* and *funding opportunities* are almost always presented across the providers reviewed. *General funding opportunities* are particularly clearly highlighted across websites, however only a few providers offered a searchable *funding opportunities* database. This would add significant value to the student search experience, particularly for those who would require financial support when considering university attendance.[21] As expected, information about *tuition fees* is provided by all the providers reviewed, as is information regarding *financial support*. This is most effectively presented when the information is located on course specific webpages, rather than a separate webpage.[22]

Importantly, however, more detailed but critical information is much harder to uncover. It is not always possible or easy to identify *when tuition fees are payable*, or specific information about the likelihood of *changes to tuition fees* in the future. Where this information is available, it is often associated with pages specific to fees, but not specific to individual courses. This could lead prospective students to search, sometimes unsuccessfully, for what is critically important information. The categories most inadequately presented, however, are *additional costs associated with study* and *whether these costs are mandatory*.[23] This is particularly significant for those courses associated with the arts, where additional material and workspace costs are an inherent part of any programme. It is reasonable to assume additional costs will also be incurred for other subjects too (across the sciences for example). Of these courses, only three institutions provide

---

[21] A central searchable funding database that all HE providers linked to would be beneficial. Prospects provide a postgraduate specific search engine (http://www.prospects.ac.uk/funding_postgraduate_study.htm) which could be extended to undergraduate funding opportunities.

[22] HEFCW's 2010 publication *Provision of Information for Students on Cost of Information* provides information for students regarding information about general cost of living. This information has the potential to be translated into user oriented information on provider websites.

[23] The CMA's guidance document *UK higher education providers – advice on consumer protection law* has particular emphasis on additional and mandatory costs of study.

easily accessible information about additional costs, and only two of these outline whether such costs are mandatory. A good example of how providers can effectively and simply provide this information is presented in Figure 2.

Materials and study visits

2015/2016 Contribution to materials and study visits

All Art & Design undergraduate courses require students to carry out significant creative work outside of lectures and we supply workshops and labs for students to use. The University requires students on these courses to pay a contribution towards the materials and services provided.

The School is able to purchase consumables at trade and bulk discount costs, providing workshops and studios with a stock of readily available materials. This helps to reduce the complexity of individuals needing to source and buy small amounts of specialist materials. Charging individuals for every consumable used on an item-by-item basis is unfeasible in a creative working environment, therefore this contribution provides a good solution for the community.

The contribution is also allocated to subsidise the additional costs of external facing activities. These activities are decided in response to the external projects and collaborations, exhibitions, events and trips or other opportunities available during the year.

Students will be provided with details of the materials and activities included in the contribution for their course as part of their welcome pack.

Course Based Contributions

Course	Full-time contribution	Part-time contribution
BA Textile Design for Fashion and Interiors	£270.00	£135.00
BA Fashion Design *	£165.00	£85.00
BA Fine Art	£155.00	£75.00
BA Graphic Communication	£155.00	£75.00
BA Photography	£155.00	£70.00
BA Contemporary Arts Practice	£155.00	£70.000
BA 3D Design: Idea Material Object	£270.00	£135.00
BA History of Art & Design	£100.00	£50.00
BA Creative Arts	see module-based contribution	

Figure 2 Example of information provision about additional costs

Existing gaps in information provision

Our review has highlighted a number of gaps in information provision across information and HE providers. These gaps are highlighted as they are recommended categories of information across guidance documentation – see Appendix 3.[24] Providers of information tend to present straightforward, key factual information and uncomplicated descriptive data, potentially leaving the more detailed aspects of individual courses to be clarified by HE providers directly. This is true for both sources of information designed primarily as decision-making tools, and also for the more generalised HE information sources that offer guidance and advice at a high level only. We also found however that across the sample of HE providers reviewed, key gaps in detail exist – and

---

[24] It should be noted that this report does not state which categories of information are necessarily more useful or important to students when making decisions about participating in HE. The table simply outlines categories highlighted in guidance material that are less well presented.

particularly for categories of information which might be considered critical for students. **Error! Reference source not found.** outlines those information categories which are particularly poorly represented across our mapping exercise and review of HE provider websites. As a practical first step in improving information provision, these gaps can be relatively easily plugged and could significantly help students understand the impact of their HE choices in the short and long term.

Broad category	Main gaps in information identified through the mapping review
Mission, searching and provider resources	– Career sector clustering searches – Opportunities for ambassadorial responsibilities at HE providers – Information about non-academic entry requirements – Information about course terms and conditions – Information about income and expenditure at HE providers (ease of access and presentation)
Fees and complaints handling	– Searchable funding databases – Whether tuition fees are likely to change – When fees are payable – Other extra costs associated with the course – Whether additional costs are mandatory – Complaints procedures (ease of access)
Learning and teaching requirements	– Self-study time – Regulation of the course – Whether further accreditation is required - Work placement/study abroad opportunities
Provider performance	– Expectations from HE providers of student performance – Quality of learning/teaching – Continuation rate – Destination of leavers (more contextual information) – Student-staff ratios
Contact with providers	– Variety of user experience case studies – Access to tailored responses to staff

Table 5 Main gaps in information categories across the HE information landscape[25]

SUMMARY

Our review suggests that in some instances information is lacking from HE providers that guidance indicates should be available. While information providers outside of the HE provider system are not necessarily required to follow recommended guidance material, the expectation of HE providers is that they will use the guidance documentation to help present relevant, useful and up-to-date information. Our review of the landscape suggests that this is not always apparent – where some key information is regularly hidden from view. Depth interview participants emphasised the importance of more detailed specific information about, in particular, course costs and learning experiences at HE providers.

> The two areas that students consistently say they wish they had done more research on is around teaching quality (and in particular contact hours) and employment outcomes –

---

[25] These information categories have been highlighted to varying extent in at least one of the recommended guidance material reviewed as part of this research; Appendix 3 outlines which specific guidance documentation each information category is highlighted in.

particularly the links that universities have with businesses. Here is where student expectations aren't necessarily being met. When we look at recent consumer protection documentation, total costs, teaching hours and who's doing the teaching are critical pieces of information for students. Our reviews of HE providers suggest that the majority don't actually present this information in easily accessible ways.

Depth interview, Which?

The following section of the report therefore asks to what extent current information provision is representative of what students actually need, and to what extent it is possible for HE providers to present the recommended information across guidance material in a full and explicit way.

Clarity around student information requirements and regulatory guidance material

A critical part of responding to regulatory guidance (and even the development of regulatory guidance) is to understand what categories of information prospective and current students might use; that is, outlining what they might find useful. Previous research by CFE Research has highlighted a number of key principles that play an important role in the way in which students make choices about HE. In essence, decision-making can be a very personal activity and HE information providers have a responsibility to work toward tailoring information provision to individual cases where possible – there is no real single solution for the provision of the "right" information. It could be argued therefore, that the role of HE information providers should be more aligned to supporting decision-making by encouraging individuals to be more reflexive and empowered and helping them understand what choices are important to them, and why this may be the case.

Equally, and as noted earlier, more information about a subject does not necessarily mean more informed decisions are made about that subject. There is, and has historically been, quite extensive regulatory material published which can help facilitate providers to offer a clear and detailed coverage of their offer. Across the materials reviewed as part of this study, there is a considerable number of information categories suggested as important for providers to communicate to students. It is not clear, however, whether all of this information is relevant or useful for prospective students, particularly as many of the categories are ambiguous and open to interpretation (see Appendix 3 for the categories of information reviewed across HE providers).

The relevance of accessible information will also vary between prospective students. What is relevant, for example, to a prospective student whose primary interest is in improving their employability might not be as pertinent to another student motivated by learning itself or by exploring different social and cultural experiences through HE.[26] Therefore, there is a need to help prospective HE students work through the complex and challenging array of information available and how this information can be used and interpreted for specific purposes. Fundamentally, helping prospective students make informed decisions about their educational choices is critical in the current HE marketplace, and the information provided through different online sources forms a central part of this process.

As highlighted, HE provider websites are good at providing broad information about their mission and aims, courses available and the services they offer. On the one hand, although reflective of guidance recommendations, this information might be considered as broadly marketing oriented,

---

[26] Diamond, A. Roberts, J. Vorley, T. Birkin, G. Evans, J. Sheen, J. and Nathwani, T. (2014) *UK review of the provision of information about higher education: Advisory study and literature review* HEFCE
http://www.hefce.ac.uk/pubs/rereports/year/2014/infoadvisory/

rather than providing the detail that prospective students might use when finalising an HE decision point. This more detailed information, such as course terms and conditions, additional costs of courses, the practical experience of studying at an institution, is less effectively communicated. In contrast, however, critiquing provider websites based on guidance recommendation can be problematic: should, for example, HE providers present information about the absence of a category not offered by a particular course (e.g., further accreditation or external regulation)? In other instances there is a lack of clarity about the level of detail required of providers: what, for example does a "good student experience case study" look like, or how effective is the communication of information through extensive pdf downloads? Through these examples it is clear that there is scope for improvement with regards to what and how HE providers present information and how they respond to regulatory guidance. To exemplify these points further we present a number of specific cases which we have highlighted through the review of provider websites.

CASE 1: VITAL INFORMATION CAN BE PRESENTED AS PER RECOMMENDED GUIDANCE MATERIAL, BUT BE HARD TO FIND OR HARD TO UNDERSTAND

Processes and procedures that current and prospective students may need to understand during HE are at the core of this particular case. This is, in particular, exemplified through the presentation and ease of access to complaints information and course terms and conditions. General information about *complaints handling* (i.e., how to make a complaint) is explicitly provided for all of the institutions reviewed. There are however, two considerations necessary to take into account:

— Firstly, complaints information is often more easily identified through a 'search and find' process. This implies that the information could be more clearly provided on provider websites.

— Secondly, specific information about course terms and conditions (which prospective students might use as the basis from which to make a complaint) are not routinely explicitly stated by providers, or at least are not easily identifiable on websites.

These points mean that while the complaints procedure might be described well, it is neither easily accessible nor clear about the conditions under which a complaint can or should be made – guidance documents are clear regarding the necessity of providing this information.[27] This aspect of general course information plays a hugely important role in helping students understand their rights and how to express complaint if these rights are not met. This would seem to be a significant omission.

An example is apparent when analysing income and expenditure financial information from a review of England-only HE providers.[28] Information provision regarding HE provider income and

---

[27] See for example: The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (2012) *UK Quality Code for Higher Education (Part C – Information about Higher Education Provision)* http://www.qaa.ac.uk/publications/information-and-guidance/uk-quality-code-for-higher-education-part-c-information-about-higher-education-provision

[28] We report on England-only institutions here as reflected in HEFCE's guidance document *Increasing the visibility of institutional financial information for current students (2014)*. This documentation is provided for England on HE providers in the first instance.

expenditure is explicitly stated as a key component of HEFCE's recent publication *Increasing the visibility of institutional information for current students (2014).* Our analysis shows that there is good coverage across sampled HE providers across specific recommended income categories and average coverage against expenditure categories.

Expenditure data is always provided, but not necessarily across the detailed criteria recommended. Furthermore, in the vast majority of cases both income and expenditure information is generally found within HE provider Annual Reports as pdf downloads. Access to this information could be improved further by including such information as embedded text within webpages themselves. The example given in Figure 3 does this well by presenting income and expenditure information as part of its Fees Explained page. This means that quite complicated data is presented in a student centred way.

— What does the university spend its money on?

We aim to use the funds available to us to support world-changing research, high-quality research-informed teaching, a first-class student experience, a vibrant and inspirational academic community, and outstanding academic and student facilities that help to make a University of Bristol education one of the very best in the UK.

Operating expenditure 2013/14: £467.3m

Expenditure	Amount
Staff costs	£254.9m
Other operating expenses	£153.1m
Depreciation	£45.1m
Interest payable and other financing costs	£14.2m

We are investing in teaching and research.

Our total operating expenditure in 2013/14 was £467m and of this 54% was spent on staff costs. This allows us to offer inspirational teaching by passionate academics and to embark on world-leading research - advancing knowledge and improving lives around the world. The University employs just over 5,000 staff, of which about half are academic staff and half are professional and technical services staff. These members of staff teach and support over 20,000 registered students.

We are also investing in student support

Other operating costs include a wide range of activities including the maintenance and operation of buildings and equipment, libraries, computers and student services. Examples include the Careers Service which provides guidance and information to our students and graduates and provides a mechanism for students and potential employers to meet through recruitment fairs and presentations. Welfare Services, including Disability Services, Multi-faith Chaplaincy, Student Counselling, the Students' Health Service and the Vulnerable Students Support Service, provide personal, confidential support to students, to help students manage their studies and get the best out of the University experience. The numbers using these services have increased significantly in recent years: over 15,000 students are registered with Student Health and 1,800 with Student Counselling. These services are key to supporting students as they study.

— Does the University's income come entirely from tuition fees?

In 2013/14 tuition fees represented around 32% of the University's total income. The remaining funding came from government grants for research and teaching (22%), research grants and contracts (27%), other income including trading activities (18%).

Operating income 2013/14: £485.5m

Income	Amount
Tuition fees and support grants	£156.8m
Research grants and contracts	£131.5m
Funding body grants	£104.5m
Other income	£88.9m
Endowment and other financing income	£3.8m

Figure 3: Student centred income and expenditure information

CASE 2: A LACK OF EXPLICIT INSTRUCTION IN RECOMMENDED GUIDANCE MATERIAL LEADS PROVIDERS TO PRESENT SIMILAR CATEGORIES OF INFORMATION IN WIDELY DIFFERENT WAYS

Student experience categories offer the clearest example of this case. The majority of provider websites offer some student examples about the general HE experience. This is, in general, offered at two levels:

— an outline of student life at the provider; and

— the provision of examples of student life on a specific course.

In many instances these general experience examples are associated with a provider's mission statement, facilities, student life, quality of teaching etc., and are scattered across websites. Some providers offer relatively professional video productions, containing interviews with students and staff or examples of their work. In other examples a provider will simply present a quote from a student or staff member. In this regard, the quality and depth of experiential information differs significantly, even though in both instances student experience examples are given. The coverage therefore is often good, but the quality or depth of information varies significantly. It is hard to state categorically, however, whether a highly polished video case study is inherently any better than a quote from a member of staff as we have little information about what students require from each approach, specific courses or from the university itself.

A similar issue exists with regards to *potential contact with existing students* and *access to tailored responses from staff with programme specific knowledge.* Whilst potential contact is available it is most likely to come from student support services (through emails) or admissions staff/course conveners (again through emails). This is potentially different to the specific and in-depth context of engagement possibly meant across guidance material. The quality and coverage of *user experience case studies*, and *potential contact with existing students* is not as comprehensive as that shown for more general information about the provider – but again knowing exactly what is relevant for different students is difficult to establish. Professional, engaging and visually arresting case studies are often produced, but quote based or more simple examples are not necessarily of less relevance or use to the prospective student. Case study provision associated with a Mathematics course, for example, is likely to look and feel different to that of an arts based course. Equally, smaller universities or more regionally focussed providers may wish to highlight links to their communities or local businesses rather than the experience and quality of staff in general.

CASE 3: PROVIDERS CAN PRESENT SPECIFIC INFORMATION BASED ON RECOMMENDED GUIDANCE MATERIAL, BUT DO SO IN A WAY THAT CAN BE MISLEADING OR THAT DOES NOT MEET THE NEEDS OF STUDENTS

Providers themselves often present a range of information which might independently be useful, but when put together can lead students away from critical points of relevance. An example of this is found in Figure 4, below. This figure shows a series of key facts associated with a particular course. While the figure does highlight entry requirements and length of course, it fails to detail, for example, costs (mandatory or additional), help with funding, module units (mandatory or additional), materials required and so on. Instead it provides a long list of related, but alternative, courses that can also be studied.

Key Facts

UCAS Code: W100

Tariff Required: 280

Entry Requirements: Grade B in A level Art or appropriate subject required. Satisfactory portfolio required. GCSE: Grade C in English or Welsh.

Course Length: 3 Years

Related Courses:

Fine Art / Art History
Art History
English Literature / Art History
Art History / French
Fine Art / English Literature
Drama and Theatre Studies / Fine Art
History / Fine Art
Education / Fine Art
Irish / Fine Art
Film and Television Studies / Fine Art
Welsh / Fine Art

Figure 4 Example of "key information" presentation with little or no relevant detail

The issues highlighted in Figure 4 are generally presentational, and in principle are easy to rectify. More problematic is the sometimes misleading information which is presented about a particular category with little or no surrounding explanation of what it means. Providers are required to use the KIS widget, which provides official course data about undergraduate course information. An example of this is shown in Figure 5. They use this widget to scroll through key statistics about a specific course. One specific statistic (employment) provides a good example of the problems associated with using such a tool without detailed additional context.

OFFICIAL COURSE DATA

95% Students in work / study six months after finishing

Figure 5 KIS widget used on most undergraduate course web pages

Without further information we do not know what sector these 95% of students work in, whether employment is relevant to the course it links to or whether it aligns with students' own ambitions. This lack of context was a particular concern of the National Union of Students (NUS), who suggested that statistics which present student outcomes have the potential to be highly misleading for prospective students unless there is more detailed context explaining what these statistics mean.

> Using rather blunt information or statistics about university outcomes [such as employment statistics] is not intentionally misleading, but it is symptomatic of the challenges students face when trying to understand what a piece of information means, and how it is being used.

> Depth interview, NUS

When used in such a light touch manner, even detailed official statistics can be problematic.

SUMMARY

Our review has investigated the sources and types of published information on UK HE provision for the purposes of student decision-making, quality assurance and accountability. It has done so in the context of diversification of HE fees and funding regimes across the UK. While the focus of our review has been to map information provision across widely available web based sources and HE provider sites themselves, previous research that we conducted has relevance here also. It highlights that prospective students use and engage with a variety of different types and sources of information in different ways. As such, our concluding chapter reflects on both the findings from this mapping exercise to provide recommendations for the UK HE funding bodies to consider in their ongoing review of the provision of information.

03. IMPROVING INFORMATION PROVISION

Here we conclude the report by presenting a number of key recommendations to the UK funding bodies for their consideration.

This research has highlighted a number of key issues and points for discussion about HE information provision, and raises some new questions about how to refine and improve such information. Our review and mapping exercises have led us to identify a number of potential ways to improve HE information provision and as such we make a series of key recommendations that could inform future research and ongoing policy development in this area. We summarise these recommendations below.

Develop greater clarity around what information is, and is not, needed

This review has provided insight into the significant scale and nature of online information about HE for current and prospective students. It draws attention to similarities and potential gaps in the types of information available. Where possible, we have used consumer and regulatory documentation to inform the review process, using the guidance requirements to institutions as a benchmark against which to assess the information that is available. While existing regulations and guidance offer clues as to what sorts of information other organisations should provide, they are intended for HE providers, primarily, as course providers.

It would be useful, therefore, for the UK HE funding bodies to consider more closely what specific pieces of information should be published by HE providers, and which pieces should be provided by other organisations – whether these be the funding bodies themselves or wider information providers. While it is likely to be highly challenging to require all information providers to adhere to specific blueprints for information provision, it may be worth considering what best practices could be adopted by these organisations, and what further support could be given by the funding bodies to enable the best possible provision of information. In order to do this effectively, incorporating the student voice into any assessment of information provision will of course be of critical importance in general, and of specific importance to HE providers themselves. This is particularly important given the number of information sources available and how challenging it can be for students to identify what pieces of information are relevant to them, and which sources are most trustworthy.

Furthermore, organisations spoken to as part of the information review mapping all stated that the choices students make about HE need to be supported by effective information, advice and guidance frameworks. Previous research[29] by CFE Research suggests that such frameworks should look to:

---

[29] See Diamond, A. Roberts, J. Vorley, T. Birkin, G. Evans, J. Sheen, J. and Nathwani, T. (2014) *UK review of the provision of information about higher education: Advisory study and literature review* HEFCE

— Understand that students will have different information requirements in different contexts and that support should be tailored accordingly;

— Raise awareness of the financial implications of participating in HE, particularly as elements of this information category are lacking across HE provider websites;

— Encourage HE providers to engage with students across the entire student lifecycle and in particular from an early age;

— Support students to help them reflect on their own HE preferences, to understand why they are making the choices they are;

— Empower students and equip them with the skills to make their own decisions, acknowledging that what is the "right" decision for one person may not be for someone else.

Consider the tightening of branding associated with official HE information provision

In particular, our mapping review exercise notes a lack of clarity about the type and nature of data sources used across some information sources, suggesting that more can be done to highlight the data sources used in a clear and simple way. This may even be achieved through tightening the branding of official HE datasets, to make it easier for information providers to reference data that they use. We would question whether students sufficiently recognise the KIS brand or the Unistats brand and whether data should be labelled in a clearer and more transparent way to help enhance recognition amongst prospective students. For example, data that is included in the KIS could be more clearly named/labelled or could be kite-marked to better emphasise its bona fide nature as official Government statistics.

Explore what role the UK HE funding bodies should have in the management and regulation of HE information provision

A number of key options could be explored that may improve the clarity and quality of information about HE. These options potentially sit on a continuum from developing a potential marketplace which is either: more regulated, where the UK higher education funding bodies control the collection and presentation of higher education data; to more open, where information is provided in an open source context and the market is free to develop products with little or no regulation. It should be noted that the funding bodies have limited scope to influence third-party providers of information.

---

http://www.hefce.ac.uk/pubs/rereports/year/2014/infoadvisory/; and Bowes, L. Evans, J. Nathwani, T. Birkin, G. Boyd, A. Holmes, C. Thomas, L. and Jones, S. (Forthcoming) *Understanding progression into higher education for disadvantaged and under-represented groups* BIS
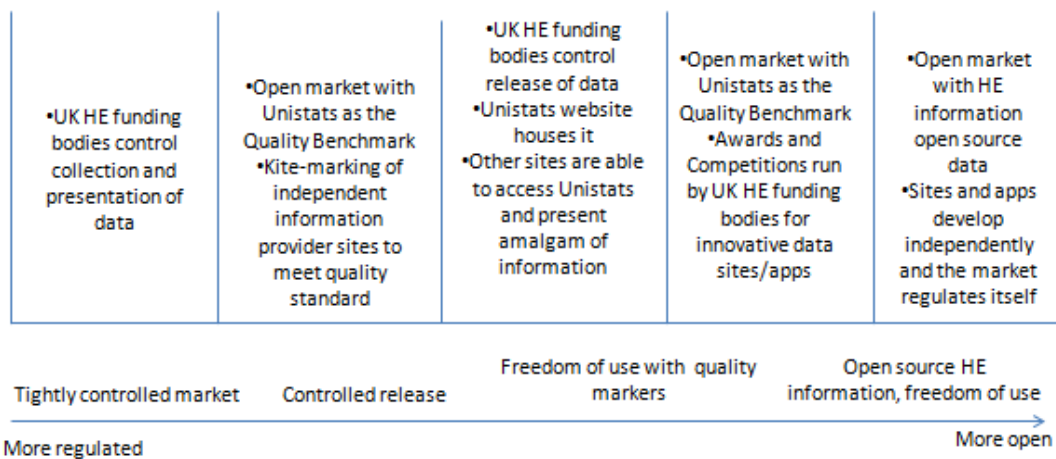
•UK HE funding bodies control collection and presentation of data	•Open market with Unistats as the Quality Benchmark •Kite-marking of independent information provider sites to meet quality standard	•UK HE funding bodies control release of data •Unistats website houses it •Other sites are able to access Unistats and present amalgam of information	•Open market with Unistats as the Quality Benchmark •Awards and Competitions run by UK HE funding bodies for innovative data sites/apps	•Open market with HE information open source data •Sites and apps develop independently and the market regulates itself

Tightly controlled market   Controlled release   Freedom of use with quality markers   Open source HE information, freedom of use

More regulated   More open

Figure 6 Regulatory options for the provision of HE information

These options, which are summarised in Figure 6, are not intended to offer a comprehensive realignment of the current status quo. It should be noted that the UK HE funding bodies in some instances already engage in a variety of these options and the diagram is intended to show the range of options available, rather than recommending one specific direction of travel. One option is for HE information provision to be tightly controlled – with Unistats holding data in-house and controlling the use of data by third party information sources. Under this scenario, official data is available through Unistats or government sources only.

At the other extreme, a 'hands off' approach to managing data is adopted, by enabling full open access to Unistats and letting third party information providers manipulate and re-present this data in any way they choose. This scenario would effectively leave the regulation and management of data on Unistats to the information provision market. In broad terms, the current situation currently falls between these two extremes, but there are possible new approaches that may be adopted. For example, a policy of controlled release could be adopted, whereby KIS data is more closely regulated by the funding bodies; this could involve kite-marking the use of data by third parties and HE providers. Another option could be to facilitate freedom of use of the KIS data, but to encourage and incentivise best practice amongst information providers through awards and competitions for innovation and highly effective examples of KIS data presentation.

Furthermore, the marketplace for the provision of information is likely to continue to evolve and it will inevitably respond to advancements in technology. Specifically HE providers will increasingly be able to gather more detailed and sophisticated data on current students' use of HE student services and resources (e.g. libraries; financial support services; students' unions facilities; learning and disability support services; childcare and counselling services). Consequently the burgeoning volume of big data that HE providers will hold could be used as an effective source of information about students' experiences. At the very least it will enable HE providers to respond to students' needs in a more informed way. Potentially HE providers could use such datasets to predict and foresee periods of increased or decreased student demand and help ensure that they respond to students' requirements by providing more efficient student services. Clearly there will also be scope, following the collection of these big datasets, for the resulting data to be interpreted

and presented back as information to prospective students. Within a continuum, such as that highlighted above, there is the potential for funding bodies to have a role to play in influencing how this process of data collection and subsequent re-presentation evolves. It is the extent of involvement from HE funding bodies in this that seems to warrant further consideration.

A more detailed consideration of the implication of each of these options is beyond the scope of this review. The UK HE funding bodies' broader work should, however, consider the potential effect of these scenarios on those using information. This is particularly important for delivering effective, clear, consistent and relevant information for both current and prospective students.

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

CAB	Citizens Advice Bureau
CMA	Competition and Markets Authority
DELNI	Department of Education and learning Northern Ireland
DLHE	Destinations of Leavers from Higher Education (survey)
FE	Further Education
HE	Higher Education
HEA	Higher Education Academy
HECSU	Higher Education Careers Support Unit
HEFCE	Higher Education Funding Council for England
HEFCW	Higher Education Funding Council for Wales
HEPISG	Higher Education Public Information Steering Group
HESA	Higher Education Statistics Agency
IDRAS	Improving Dispute Resolution Advisory Service for Further and Higher Education
KIS	Key Information Sets
LDLHE	Longitudinal Destinations of Leavers from Higher Education (survey)
NSS	National Student Survey
NUS	National Union of Students
OFFA	Office for Fair Access
OFT	Office of Fair Trading
OIA	Office of the Independent Adjudicator
QAA	Quality Assurance Agency
RESS	Research Exchange for the Social Sciences
SAAS	Student Awards Agency for Scotland
SFC	Scottish Funding Council
SLC	Student Loan Company
SPSO	Scottish Public Service Ombudsman
TSEP	The Student Engagement Partnership
UCAS	Universities and Colleges Admissions Service
UK funding bodies	In this context we are referring to one of the three higher education funding bodies: HEFCE, HEFCW, SFC or DELNI
UKCISA	UK Council for International Student Affairs
UKPASS	UK Postgraduate Application and Statistical Service

APPENDIX 1: INFORMATION MAPPING REVIEW METHODOLOGY

In order to meet the key aims and objectives of this information mapping review we have adopted a methodology which consists of desk-based reviews of information sources, HE provider websites and information guidance material, with a small number of additional in-depth interviews with key experts in the information provision and HE field.

PART 1: OVERVIEW MAPPING AND GAP ANALYSIS OF INFORMATION SOURCES IN THE UK

Part 1 of the information review mapping consisted of a rapid online search to map and analyse existing HE information sources. We collated a number of basic search keywords and applied these flexibly to build up a shortlist of potential information sources. The sources that were produced through this initial search were in turn examined for further links to other information sources, expanding our collection of websites and building a wider picture of the types of information available.

In order to produce a comparable database of information sources, we have sought to define the scope of the mapping. This has meant including specific types of information sources and excluding others. This is important because there is a large volume of generalised information about HE available online. Given its broad focus on advice and guidance rather than information, it is unlikely to form an intrinsic part of a prospective or current student's decision-making. By focusing the scope of the mapping only upon 'key' information sources, we are able to conduct a more meaningful comparison and analysis of information sources and providers, identifying potential collaboration and duplication. To do this, our information sources have met a number of basic criteria:

— The information source and its content should be primarily aimed at one or more of the following audiences:
    – prospective students seeking information to inform their decisions about applications to undergraduate study;
    – current students seeking information to inform their decisions while studying;
    – prospective postgraduate taught students seeking information to inform their decisions while studying;
    – individuals or students seeking information about learning and teaching, and the student experience;
    – individuals or students seeking information to inform their decisions about further study or transitions to employment.
— The information source should be current and include up-to-date information about HE, rather than solely historical information.

Categories of information used to assess the coverage of information provision across these information sources were established through the following process:

— The building of a web-based search to identify the different sources of information produced by different types of organisations;

— The collation of the data in a spreadsheet detailing the information provider, information source and data source and the format and purpose of the information, and who the provider type collaborates with;

— A review of guidance documentation produced by HEFCE and the UK funding bodies, the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) and the Competition and Markets Authority (CMA);

— Exploration of the accessibility, usability and comprehensiveness of the information available in order to identify gaps;

— Identification of areas of duplication, which could be reduced by greater collaboration, coordination or streamlining.

In-depth interviews

To supplement the desk research during this stage, we also conducted a small number of interviews with consumer rights organisations, HE stakeholders and information experts. These interviews supplemented the findings from the mapping review and explored the extent to which:

— Information is re-used by organisations;

— Better collaboration between organisations can take place;

— Current information meets expectations;

— Information presented is fit for purpose for the short, medium and long-term;

— There are any implications of likely changes to the information landscape for information providers.

Table 6 outlines the organisations included as part of these in-depth interviews.

Organisation	Organisation type
NUS	Student voice
JISC	Digital information and technology charity
Which?	Consumer rights organisation
HESA	Information provider

Table 6 Depth interview organisations

PART 2: IN-DEPTH INVESTIGATION OF INFORMATION PUBLISHED BY INSTITUTIONS

Part 2 of the research involved an investigation of the information presented on HE provider websites across a sample of 12 institutions across the UK and the extent to which it meets recommended, published regulatory guidance for the provision of information. Appendix 5 provides the coding matrix used to analyse these institutions, the findings of which are discussed in the report. As part of this review, HEFCE and HEFCW have also provided analysis of Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales specific HE providers, and a selection of additional England specific HE

providers. The information presented in these additional reviews is outlined in Appendices 6, 7 and 8. These form part of the general narrative of the reporting process (and map consistently across the general findings). The study does not, however, provide separate reporting on each additional appendix. Part two of the study does include a review of the extent and quality of:

— General information presented by HE providers (from both an undergraduate and postgraduate perspective and UK-wide);
— Course specific information for selective undergraduate and postgraduate taught courses (again UK-wide);
— Provider income and expenditure information (for providers in England only).

Building a coding matrix

In order to review a sample of HE provider websites for the information they present to students we developed a coding matrix that presents the key categories identified through a review of the following key regulatory guidance documentation:

— Competition and Markets Authority (2015) *UK higher education providers – advice on consumer protection law*;
— HEFCE (2014) *Increasing the visibility of institutional financial information for current students*;
— HEFCE and the UK Funding Bodies (2014) *What information do prospective postgraduate taught students need?*;
— The Office of Fair Trading (2013) *Call for Information on the Undergraduate Higher Education Sector in England*;
— The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (2012) *UK Quality code for Higher Education (Part C – Information about Higher Education Provision)*.

The coding matrix was built to show the following information.

— General information HE providers are recommended to present – for prospective undergraduate and prospective postgraduate students;
— Course specific information HE providers are recommended to present – across three course types (two undergraduate and one postgraduate course);
— The range of HE providers included in the review, by typology.

The full coding matrix is presented in Appendix 5, Coding Matrix, provided to accompany this report.

Typology of HE providers included in the mapping review

Traditional classifications by mission group or by foundation date are insufficient to represent the current diversity of providers, and they lack a systematic analytical basis. For this purpose we use a typology based on research for the Economic and Social Research Council. The typology, developed by Howells, Ramlogan & Cheng (2009), is derived from a statistical cluster analysis of

data on 174 universities. A set of thirteen variables used in the analysis, including data on five areas: size, research, teaching, third mission, and social inclusion. The analysis produced seven cluster groups of HE providers (see Table 7 for detail).

This typology requires a few modifications in order for it to function effectively for our analysis, however. Firstly, for the purposes of sampling we have disregarded the 'Open' category since it has only one member (The Open University). This leaves six lists of providers to review. To create a sample of twelve institutions in the analysis, our approach was to select two institutions from each category, with the exception of the London Specialists, where one has been chosen.

We are conscious that the typology does not include alternative providers of HE or further education colleges that offer HE provision. Because of this, we include an additional category for the typology, Further Education Providers offering Higher Education.[30] The typology is summarised in Table 7 below.

Category (size)	Characteristics
Research-led, third mission (6 universities included in category)	Large, international, highly research intensive, high knowledge exploitation and enterprise oriented, but low overall growth and low research income growth
Local Access (38)	High access, low overall growth, high research growth (but from small base)
Elite Research (19)	Large, international, research intensive universities, low research growth, high overall growth
London Specialists (7)	Research intensive, high research growth, but low overall growth
High Teaching Growth (42)	High student growth rate, average overall growth and below average size, slightly above average research income, but low research growth
Research Oriented, Teaching Growth (6)	Generally large, research intensive institutions, enterprise focused, with high student growth
Open (1)	Large, high access, domestic focused university
Further Education Providers offering Higher Education	Institutions not included in the typology by Howells *et al.* (2009)

Table 7 Categorisation and selection of HE providers for the matrix analysis

With respect to the courses that we have included within the reviews, two undergraduate and one postgraduate course have been included. These courses were selected as they are representative of popular degree subjects covering both creative and technical subjects. They are:

— Undergraduate degree in a creative arts subject (for example Drama, Music or Fine Art);

[30] HEFCE are conducting a separate review of HE providers using this matrix, which will include a sample of alternative providers.

— Undergraduate degree in traditional subject (primarily mathematics if offered, otherwise biology or English);

— Postgraduate degree, primarily in Law (e.g. LLM Criminal Law), or Counselling e.g. MA in Counselling) if law is not offered.

It may be the case that the identical course is not available across all of the institutions. In these instances, we include courses that are as similar as possible. For the further education college identified, as close as possible a review of undergraduate courses will be undertaken. For North Lindsey College therefore, a *Humanities, education and social sciences* degree and a *Sports development and coaching* degree is reviewed. It is, however, not possible to review postgraduate information from the further education college perspective. Appendix 2 highlights the courses under review across each of the sampled providers. The analysis looks at information for courses beginning in the 2015/2016 academic year. Indicating the presence or absence of these categories of information allows for a quantitative analysis of the coverage of each category.

Process of the review

The following information about the practical process of the review is important to consider in combination with the outcomes of the analysis.

Review of general HE provider undergraduate and postgraduate information

This aspect of the review assesses the availability of information for prospective undergraduate and postgraduate students on provider websites. Categories for the review are highlighted in Table 8.

Category 1: Mission, searching and provider resources	Category 2: Fees and complaints handling	Category 3: Contact with provider
University mission description	General fee information	User experience case studies
A-Z list of course titles	General information on funding opportunities	Potential contact with existing students
Course title clustering	Searchable funding database	Access to tailored responses from staff (administrators or academics) with programme specific knowledge
Broader subject group clustering	Complaints handling process	
Career sector clustering		
Study mode clustering (whether courses are full or part time)		
Accessibility of learning support facilities		
Facilities available (libraries, specialised learning environments)		
Information about advisory services (student support, student unions, alumni)		
Ambassadorial opportunities		

Table 8 General undergraduate and postgraduate information review by category

The search requires identification of each of the categories listed, both from an undergraduate and a postgraduate perspective. In many instances the categories are not specifically targeted at

prospective undergraduate or postgraduate students, but offer general information about the provider (the services it provides and the location it is in for example). This information is therefore relevant to both prospective undergraduate and postgraduate information, and is counted in the analysis only once.

Review of HE provider course specific information

For each provider, three specific courses have been reviewed; two undergraduate courses and one postgraduate course. These courses are as consistent across providers as possible; however of primary importance is that they are in the same broad subject areas – they do not need to be exactly the same course. The categories for review consist of general course information (entry requirements and module information, learning and teaching information, and performance); course fee information and contact with provider, and are presented in detail in Table 9.

Category 1: General course information	Category 2: Course fee information	Category 3: Contact with provider
Entry requirements and module information	Tuition fees	User experience case studies
Academic entry requirements	Will tuition fees change?	Potential contact with existing students
Non-academic entry requirements	Other extra costs (e.g., trips, materials)	Access to tailored responses from staff (administrators or academics) with programme specific knowledge
Details about the application and admissions process	Whether extra costs are mandatory	
Segmentation of the application process (clearly labelled for different application types)	Is financial support available?	
Core course modules	When are fees payable?	
Indication of likely optional modules		
Course terms and conditions		
English language proficiency		
Learning and teaching information		
Contact hours		
Self study time		
Staff experience delivering course		
Facilities available (libraries, specialised learning environments)		
Methods of assessment of the course		
The award to be received		
Location of study (i.e. any work placements/studying abroad)		
Length of the award		
Whether the course and provider are regulated		
Whether the course is accredited		
Further accreditation required		
Course performance		
How well the programme at the HEI is performing		
Types of skills and experience the applicant		

will gain		
Expectations from the provider of the student		
Student/staff ratio		
Quality of student		

Table 9 Course specific categories for review

Review of England only HE provider income and expenditure

A final category for review is provider income and expenditure. This is recommended in HEFCE (2014) *Increasing the visibility of institutional financial information for current students*. Table 10 provides details of the specific searches under review. Analysis of this category is presented for England providers only.

Category 1: Income	Category 2: Expenditure
Funding body grants	Academic departments
Tuition fees and education contracts	Academic service
Research grants and contracts	Administration and central services
Endowment and investment income	Premises
Other income	Residences and catering
	Research grants and contracts
	Other expenditure

Table 10 HE provider review income and expenditure categories (England only)

Coding system and presentation of data

When reviewing provider websites each category has been given a score of 0, 1 or 2 depending on the level of detail of information the provider presents.

— '1' is given if the provider presents explicit information about a particular category (i.e., "course fees are £9,000 per annum").[31]

— '2' is given if the provider presents general reference information but not explicit detail (i.e., a general description of fees, rather than specific costs)

— '0' is given if no information is provided about a category under review, or if the information could not be found.

In general if information about a specific category was not found in 10 clicks through the website then it was assumed not to be available (with a 0 placed in the relevant category). Judgement was required when considering the boundaries between whether the information was explicitly, generally or not presented and much depended on the relevance of a piece of information. For example, just because a piece of information was not explicitly stated, does not necessarily mean that it was of lower quality than general information (although it may be in some instances).

---

[31] We chose 10 clicks because of the wide variety of information available on provider websites. In early website development research, it was suggested that 3 clicks were optimum for user satisfaction in finding information on websites. Recent research suggests that users are content with 5, 10 or even 12 clicks. 10 clicks were chosen to balance this process between information that is easy to find and the fact that many prospective students may be coming to these websites for the first time and will need a period of time familiarising themselves with the websites.

Furthermore, some of the categories lent themselves much more toward textual descriptions of information rather than a specific figure.

Category coverage

In presenting information that looks at the coverage of specific categories across HE providers a binary classification has been adopted (i.e., whether the information is presented or not) irrespective of the explicit or general nature of the description. A category is considered as having:

— Good coverage if it is presented on more than 75% of provider websites;

— Average coverage if it is presented on fewer than 75% but more than 25% of provider websites;

— Poor coverage if it is presented on fewer than 25% of provider websites.[32]

Narrative and qualitative discussion for each broad category is then provided to draw out more detailed findings regarding the quality of the information provided; not just that it is presented, but how and in what form. In doing this we have considered:

— Whether the information reflects guidance provided in the types of information and how it should be presented;

— What is provided;

— Whether there are examples of where institutions have responded to the guidance in a particularly effective way.

---

[32] We have adopted this approach for analysis of websites across each of Appendices 6-9.

APPENDIX 2: HE PROVIDERS AND COURSES REVIEWED

The table below outlines the courses reviewed across each of the 12 HE provider websites.

HE Provider Location	HE Provider Typology	Course Title
Scotland	Research-Led, Third Mission	BSc Product Design and Innovation
		BSc Mathematics
		LLM Criminal Law and Criminal Justice
England	Research-Led, Third Mission	BA Drama and Theatre Arts
		BSc Mathematics
		LLM Criminal Law and Criminal Justice
England	Local Access	BA Fine Art
		BSc Mathematics
		LLM International Law
England	Local Access	BA Music
		BSc Biology
		MA in Counselling and Psychotherapy Practice
England	Research Oriented, Teaching Growth	BA Music
		BSc Mathematics
		LLM Masters of Law
Scotland	Elite Research	BA Art
		BSc Mathematics
		LLM Law
England	High Teaching Growth	BA Fine Art
		BA English
		MA in Counselling
Wales	High Teaching Growth	BA Fine Art
		BSc Mathematics
		LLM Law
Northern Ireland	High Teaching Growth	BA Drama and English
		BSc Mathematics
		MLaw Law
England	Research Oriented, Teaching Growth	BA Music
		BSc Mathematics and Computer Science
		MA Law
England	Research Oriented, Teaching Growth	BMus Music
		BSc Mathematics
		LLM Law
England	Further Education College offering Higher Education	BA English and History Studies
		BSc Sports Development and Coaching
		N/A

Table 11 Specific courses reviewed across HE providers

APPENDIX 3: SOURCES OF INFORMATION CATEGORIES USED IN REVIEW OF HE PROVIDERS

The following tables highlight which regulatory guidance documentation each information category is sourced from: some may have more than one source. It is important to note that our review incorporates an assessment of coverage of categories of information for both undergraduate and postgraduate study, irrespective of the focus of the guidance material.

GENERAL HE PROVIDER INFORMATION FOR PROSPECTIVE UNDERGRADUATE AND POSTGRADUATE STUDENTS

Mission, searching and provider resources

Mission Searching and Provider Resources	Source
University mission description	– QAA (2012) UK Quality code for Higher Education (Part C – Information about Higher Education Provision) – UK Funding Bodies (2014) What information do prospective postgraduate taught students need
A-Z list of course titles	– UK Funding Bodies (2014) What information do prospective postgraduate taught students need
Course title clustering	– UK Funding Bodies (2014) What information do prospective postgraduate taught students need
Broader subject group clustering	– UK Funding Bodies (2014) What information do prospective postgraduate taught students need
Career sector clustering	– UK Funding Bodies (2014) What information do prospective postgraduate taught students need
Study mode clustering	– UK Funding Bodies (2014) What information do prospective postgraduate taught students need
Accessibility of learning support facilities	– CMA (2015) UK higher education providers - advice on consumer protection law
Facilities available (libraries, specialised learning environments)	– QAA (2012) UK Quality code for Higher Education (Part C – Information about Higher Education Provision)
Information about advisory services (Student support, student unions, alumni)	– QAA (2012) UK Quality code for Higher Education (Part C – Information about Higher Education Provision)
Ambassadorial opportunities	– UK Funding Bodies (2014) What information do prospective postgraduate taught students need

Table 12 General information categories: mission, searching and provider resources

Fees and complaints handling

Fees and Complaints Handling	Source
General fee information	– QAA (2012) UK Quality code for Higher Education (Part C – Information about Higher Education Provision)
General information on funding opportunities	– UK Funding Bodies (2014) What information do prospective postgraduate taught students need
Searchable funding database	– UK Funding Bodies (2014) What information do prospective postgraduate taught students need
Complaints handling process	– CMA (2015) UK higher education providers – advice on consumer protection law

Table 13 General information categories: fees and complaints handling

Contact with provider

Contact with Provider	Source
User experience case studies	– QAA (2012) UK Quality code for Higher Education (Part C – Information about Higher Education Provision)
Potential contact with existing students	– UK Funding Bodies (2014) What information do prospective postgraduate taught students need
Access to tailored responses from staff (administrators or academics) with programme specific knowledge	– UK Funding Bodies (2014) What information do prospective postgraduate taught students need

Table 14 General information categories: contact with provider

COURSE SPECIFIC INFORMATION

General course information

Entry requirements and module information

Entry Requirements and Module Information	Source
Academic entry requirements	– CMA (2015) UK higher education providers - advice on consumer protection law – QAA (2012) UK Quality code for Higher Education (Part C – Information about Higher Education Provision)
Non-academic entry requirements	– CMA (2015) UK higher education providers – advice on consumer protection law – QAA (2012) UK Quality code for Higher Education (Part C – Information about Higher Education Provision)
Details about the application and admissions process	– QAA (2012) UK Quality code for Higher Education (Part C – Information about Higher Education Provision)
Core course modules	– CMA (2015) UK higher education providers – advice on consumer protection law – QAA (2012) UK Quality code for Higher Education (Part C – Information about Higher Education Provision)
Indication of likely optional modules	– CMA (2015) UK higher education providers – advice on consumer protection law – QAA (2012) UK Quality code for Higher Education (Part C – Information about Higher Education Provision)
Course terms and conditions	– CMA (2015) UK higher education providers – advice on consumer protection law – QAA (2012) UK Quality code for Higher Education (Part C – Information about Higher Education Provision)
English language proficiency	– CMA (2015) UK higher education providers – advice on consumer protection law

Table 15 Course specific information: entry requirements and module information

Learning and teaching requirements

Learning and Teaching Requirements	Source
Methods of assessment of the course	– CMA (2015) UK higher education providers – advice on consumer protection law – OFT (2013) Call for information on the undergraduate higher education sector in England – QAA (2012) UK Quality code for Higher Education (Part C – Information about Higher Education Provision)
Length of the award	– CMA (2015) UK higher education providers – advice on consumer protection law – QAA (2012) UK Quality code for Higher Education (Part C – Information about Higher Education Provision)
Contact hours	– CMA (2015) UK higher education providers – advice on consumer

	protection law
	– OFT (2013) Call for information on the undergraduate higher education sector in England
	– QAA (2012) UK Quality code for Higher Education (Part C – Information about Higher Education Provision)
Self study time	– CMA (2015) UK higher education providers - advice on consumer protection law
	– OFT (2013) Call for information on the undergraduate higher education sector in England
	– QAA (2012) UK Quality code for Higher Education (Part C – Information about Higher Education Provision)
Location of study (i.e. any work placements/studying abroad)	– CMA (2015) UK higher education providers - advice on consumer protection law
	– QAA (2012) UK Quality code for Higher Education (Part C – Information about Higher Education Provision)
Staff experience delivering course	– CMA (2015) UK higher education providers – advice on consumer protection law
	– OFT (2013) Call for information on the undergraduate higher education sector in England
	– QAA (2012) UK Quality code for Higher Education (Part C – Information about Higher Education Provision)
The award to be received	– CMA (2015) UK higher education providers – advice on consumer protection law
	– QAA (2012) UK Quality code for Higher Education (Part C – Information about Higher Education Provision)
Whether the course is accredited	– CMA (2015) UK higher education providers – advice on consumer protection law
	– QAA (2012) UK Quality code for Higher Education (Part C – Information about Higher Education Provision)
Whether the course and provider are regulated	– CMA (2015) UK higher education providers – advice on consumer protection law
	– QAA (2012) UK Quality code for Higher Education (Part C – Information about Higher Education Provision)
Further accreditation required	– CMA (2015) UK higher education providers – advice on consumer protection law
	– OFT (2013) Call for information on the undergraduate higher education sector in England

Table 16 Course specific information: learning and teaching requirements

Course performance

Performance	Source
Types of skills and experience the applicant will gain	– OFT (2013) Call for information on the undergraduate higher education sector in England
	– QAA (2012) UK Quality code for Higher Education (Part C – Information about Higher Education Provision)
How well the programme at the HE provider is performing	– OFT (2013) Call for information on the undergraduate higher education sector in England
	– QAA (2012) UK Quality code for Higher Education (Part C – Information about Higher Education Provision)
Expectations from the provider of the student	– OFT (2013) Call for information on the undergraduate higher education sector in England
Student/staff ratio	– OFT (2013) Call for information on the undergraduate higher education sector in England
Quality of student	– OFT (2013) Call for information on the undergraduate higher education sector in England

Table 17 Course specific information: course performance

Course fees information

Course Fee Information	Source
Tuition fees	– CMA (2015) UK higher education providers – advice on consumer protection law – OFT (2013) Call for information on the undergraduate higher education sector in England – UK Funding Bodies (2014) What information do prospective postgraduate taught students need
Is financial support available	– UK Funding Bodies (2014) What information do prospective postgraduate taught students need – OFT (2013) Call for information on the undergraduate higher education sector in England
When are fees payable	– CMA (2015) UK higher education providers – advice on consumer protection law – UK Funding Bodies (2014) What information do prospective postgraduate taught students need
Will tuition fees change	– CMA (2015) UK higher education providers – advice on consumer protection law – UK Funding Bodies (2014) What information do prospective postgraduate taught students need
Other extra costs (e.g., trips, materials)	– CMA (2015) UK higher education providers – advice on consumer protection law – UK Funding Bodies (2014) What information do prospective postgraduate taught students need – OFT (2013) Call for information on the undergraduate higher education sector in England
Whether extra costs are mandatory	– CMA (2015) UK higher education providers – advice on consumer protection law – UK Funding Bodies (2014) What information do prospective postgraduate taught students need – OFT (2013) Call for information on the undergraduate higher education sector in England

Table 18 Course specific information: fees

Contact with HE provider

Contact with provider	Source
User experience case studies	– QAA (2012) UK Quality code for Higher Education (Part C - Information about Higher Education Provision)
Potential contact with existing students	– UK Funding Bodies (2014) What information do prospective postgraduate taught students need
Access to tailored responses from staff (administrators or academics) with programme specific knowledge	– UK Funding Bodies (2014) What information do prospective postgraduate taught students need

Table 19 Course specific information: contact with HE provider

APPENDIX 4: REVIEW OF REGULATORY AND STUDENT SUPPORT ORGANISATIONS

We have gathered a list of regulatory and student support organisations as part of this review. Table 20 provides details of each of these organisations.

Regulatory and Student Support Organisations	Structure and Purpose of Organisation
AMOSSHE The Student Services Organisation	Informs and supports the leaders of Student Services in the UK, and represents, advocates for and promotes the student experience worldwide.
Citizens Advice Bureau (CAB)	CAB services run by individual charities. Provides free independent advice on rights and responsibilities.
Competition and Markets Authority (CMA)	Non-ministerial department. Took over some responsibilities from Office of Fair Trading (OFT) in 2014. Promotes competition, investigates problems in markets, enforces consumer protection legislation, brings criminal proceedings.
Department for Employment and Learning, Northern Ireland (DELNI)	Department of the Northern Irish administration. Supports individuals and businesses in areas of education and employment.
HM Government	GOV.UK website includes provision of information about HE courses and funding.
Improving Dispute Resolution Advisory Service for Further and Higher Education (IDRAS)	Not-for-profit company, funded by HEFCE. Not a regulatory body; no formal powers. Provides independent free support and guidance to students, employees and researchers.
LearnDirect	Provider of skills, training and employment services.
Money Saving Expert	Independent advice on university costs and student finance.
National Union of Students (NUS)	Voluntary membership organisation, confederation of 600 students' unions. Supports students and their unions.
Office for Fair Access (OFFA)	Independent regulator of fair access to HE in England.
Office of Fair Trading (OFT)	Closed 1 April 2014, with responsibilities going to CMA and Financial Conduct Authority. Was responsible for protecting consumer interests.
Office of the Independent Adjudicator (OIA)	Independent body. Reviews student complaints.
Scottish Public Service Ombudsman (SPSO)	Handles complaints about universities and colleges (as well as NHS, housing, prisons, etc.)
Student Awards Agency for Scotland (SAAS)	Agency of the Scottish Government. Provides financial support to eligible students doing a course of HE in the UK
Student Finance England	Not clear whether it exists anymore – no description on Student Loans Company (SLC) page, and contact info on gov.uk links to social media accounts.
Student Finance Northern Ireland	Partnership between DELNI, SLC and Education and Library Boards in NI. Provides financial support to students who normally live in Northern Ireland
Student Finance Wales	Partnership between the Department for Education and Skills and the SLC. Provides financial support for students from Wales who are in FE or HE in the UK.
Student Loans Company (SLC)	Not-for-profit, government-owned company. Provides loans and grants to students in universities and colleges in the UK.

The Higher Education Academy (HEA)	Professional body, publicly-funded. Responsible for UK Professional Standards Framework. Funds, disseminates and applies research in UK HE.
The Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE)	Non-departmental body. Funds and regulates universities and colleges in England. Also provides information to students.
The Higher Education Funding Council for Wales (HEFCW)	Funds and regulates universities and colleges in Wales.
The Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA)	Official source of data on UK HE.
The Office of Qualifications and Examinations Regulation (Ofqual)	Non-ministerial department. Regulates qualifications and exams in England and vocational qualifications in Northern Ireland.
The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA)	Independent body. Monitors and advises on standards and quality in HE.
The Scottish Further and Higher Education Funding Council (SFC)	Funds FE and HE in Scotland.
The Student Engagement Partnership (TSEP)	Resource for promoting student engagement in HE.
The Student Room	Online community for students. Hosts forums and provides information on HE.
UK Council for International Student Affairs (UKCISA)	Advisory body for international students in the UK.
Wise Wales	Resource for promoting student engagement in HE.

Table 20 List of regulatory and/or student support organisations