
**PART-TIME STUDENTS AND EMPLOYMENT: REPORT OF A STUDY OF THE
COLLECTION AND USE OF INFORMATION ON THE EMPLOYMENT OF
PART-TIME STUDENTS, GRADUATES AND DIPLOMATES**

John Brennan, Jonathan Mills, Tarla Shah and Alan Woodley

November 1999

The views expressed in this report are the authors and do not necessarily reflect those of the Department for Education and Employment.

© Crown Copyright

ISBN 0 7492 9184 2

CONTENTS

	Page
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY	5
1. INTRODUCTION	13
2. NEEDS ANALYSIS	16
3. THE SURVEY: TECHNICAL ISSUES	29
4. THE USES OF EMPLOYMENT DATA	38
5. GENERAL RECOMMENDATIONS	41
6. BIBLIOGRAPHY	52
APPENDIX I: THE QUESTIONNAIRES	53
APPENDIX II: ASSESSMENT OF THE QUESTIONNAIRES	62
APPENDIX III: COSTS OF THE SURVEY	66
APPENDIX IV: EXPERIENCES OF THE PARTNER INSTITUTIONS	67
APPENDIX V: MEMBERSHIP OF THE STEERING GROUP	76

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

BACKGROUND AND AIMS OF THE PROJECT

- 1 Six universities with AGCAS (the Association of Graduate Careers Advisory Services) and HESA (the Higher Education Statistics Agency) have collaborated in a feasibility study to collect information about the employment experiences of their part-time students, graduates and diplomates. The project, part of the DfEE's Higher Education and Employment Development Programme, was undertaken by the Quality Support Centre for Higher Education Research and Information (QSC) on behalf of Anglia Polytechnic University, Nottingham Trent University, the Open University, Sheffield Hallam University, University of Westminster, University of Wolverhampton, AGCAS and HESA.

- 2 The aims of the project were:
 - (i) to examine the feasibility of extending the collection of information on the employment of graduates to include part-time students and graduates, taking into account changes in their employment during and after their course of study;

 - (ii) to examine the ways in which employment information of this kind can best be used to improve the relevance of higher education provision of part-time students and employers through improved planning, course design and delivery; to provide better advice on local career and employment opportunities; and to achieve a greater customer focus in higher education provision.

- 3 The provision of part-time courses – at sub-degree, first degree and postgraduate levels – is one of the important ways in which many higher education institutions attempt to meet local and regional needs. Nationally, many students are in full-time employment during their studies and many, although by no means all, are supported in their studies in various ways by their employers. Yet debates about the employability of graduates frequently neglect the experiences of people who have studied part-time. The most commonly-used source of data on graduate employment – the annual First Destinations Survey (FDS) – excludes part-timers.

-
- 4 The project, which had three main phases, assessed the needs of higher education institutions for better information about the employment of their part-time students; it investigated – by means of a postal survey – the feasibility of collecting such information; and it supported the participating institutions in the analysis and use of the data. Finally, it made recommendations concerning the future collection of information about the effects on employment of part-time study.

NEEDS OF HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS FOR INFORMATION ABOUT THE EMPLOYMENT OF THEIR PART-TIME STUDENTS

- 5 The project undertook a national survey of institutions as well as interviews in the partner universities and some of their local employers.
- 6 In most higher education institutions, information about graduate employment (mainly derived from the FDS) is used, alongside other sources of information, to contribute to course and curriculum design, institutional planning, quality assurance, careers guidance, and marketing. Yet information about the employment of graduates who have studied part-time is generally unavailable to feed into these important institutional processes. This was a gap which virtually everyone who was contacted by the project thought should be filled.
- 7 The need for information about the employment of part-time students would not adequately be met by a simple extension of the annual First Destinations Survey to include such students. The employment situation of part-timers is different from that of full-timers – most are in employment before and during as well as after their courses; the FDS obtains quite limited information at a fixed point in time after graduation; to extend the FDS would, in the views of many, be too expensive. The survey undertaken by the project attempted to take account of the above points.

THE SURVEY OF PART-TIME STUDENTS AND GRADUATES

- 9 A questionnaire was sent to 6,000 current and former students (from both degree and sub-degree courses) from the six partner universities. Current students were defined as those half-way through their courses. The graduates were from the 1997-98 academic year and were contacted approximately six months after their graduation.

-
- 10 Distinctive features of the survey were
- information was collected from recent graduates *and* from currently enrolled students (for people already in employment, part-time study can impact upon their employment situation well before they graduate);
 - FDS-type information on employment status, type of work and type of employment was collected (to permit comparison with employment data on full-time students);
 - the above information was augmented by information on the student's background, aspirations and reasons for study, job changes since starting the course, and additional information about employment, e.g. hours worked, income (reflecting the institutional needs for information identified in the first phase of the project).
- 11 2,078 graduates and students returned their questionnaires, representing an overall response rate of 36%. One postcard reminder was sent out. The response rate is comparable to that achieved by the First Destinations Survey through the initial postal contact and by other surveys of students and graduates. Considerable additional effort is then expended by the FDS to attempt to achieve a target response rate of 80%. This was not done in the case of this survey. Response rates differed substantially between institutions, with one university achieving 56%. For future surveys of this type, response rates could be increased by further reminders, telephone follow-up etc.
- 12 In order to reduce costs, the survey used self-coding and computer scanning of data, the latter was arranged by HESA. These features – and the general design of the questionnaire – appear to have been broadly successful. The project was able to conclude that
- ‘it is perfectly feasible to collect rather more extensive information about graduates than is collected by the FDS, information which in the case of part-timers takes better account of the complexities and contexts of the relationship between employment and part-time study’.
- 13 As well as being used by the six participating institutions in their own internal processes, the results of the survey are published in a separate report by QSC entitled ***Part-time Students and Employment: report of a survey of students, graduates and diplomates***. The report describes the many ways in which part-time study affects employability – from job changes to enhanced responsibilities and salary increases. It also reveals the diversity of motivations for part-time study and the extent of employer support for such students.
-

14 Use of graduate employment data of this sort in the future will be dependent upon a number of factors of which the most important are likely to be:

- external requirements: funding formulae and national quality assurance methodologies being key factors;
- institutional management: the existence of the necessary institutional frameworks and policies with properly resourced support mechanisms provided for their implementation;
- support mechanisms which include appropriate expertise in collection, analysis, interpretation and presentation of data to meet diverse institutional needs at different organisational levels;
- credibility of information collected to advise diverse constituencies, inside and outside higher education.

Above all, the complexities of the links between part-time study and employment need to be reflected in any information collected – if it is not to be dismissed as misleading and unhelpful.

GENERAL RECOMMENDATIONS

15 The evidence of this project is that collecting employment data on part-time students, graduates and diplomates is both feasible and valuable. The report makes recommendations about how this might best be done in future. The report's recommendations are summarised as follows:

- (i) on the approach to surveying: *that a tracking methodology be adopted, with a first questionnaire sent out as part of the registration process and a second questionnaire after leaving the course;*
- (ii) on timing of the second questionnaire: *that six months after graduation is too early to obtain an accurate picture of the impact of part-time study on employment; the exact timing of the data collection should take account of the uses to which such data will be put as well as the arrangements which are in place for the collection of data from graduates of full-time courses;*
- (iii) on coverage: *that the sampling frame for the second questionnaire should include 'early leavers' as well as those who have completed their studies;*

-
- (iv) on content of information to be collected: *that the questionnaires used for the survey collect information on employment status, type of work, income, career changes, employer support, purposes of study and further study. This information should be combined with data from the student record to provide a broader range of social and biographical information;*

(A suggested questionnaire for this purpose is included as Appendix I to this report.)

- (v) On data entry: *that computer scanning be used rather than manual data entry or coding for the two surveys.*

16 Major choices will be required concerning data collection, sampling and response rates. These concern centralised versus institution-based data collection, census versus sampling approaches, and the targets to be set for response rates.

The 'preferred option', based on the evidence obtained in this project, is as follows:

- (i) As a compulsory part of the registration process, an employment questionnaire is sent out by institutions to **all** new part-time students. The questionnaires are returned (directly or via institutions) to HESA which is responsible for computer scanning the results, entering them on a database, and returning the datasets to the institutions involved.
- (ii) A second questionnaire is sent out by institutions to a **sample** of students after they have left their respective higher education courses. The sample contains two elements and is selected by HESA according to agreed principles.

First, for each institution there would be a general sample which would be representative of the part-time student population of that institution as a whole. This sample is designed to perform a general monitoring function and to allow year-on-year monitoring by the institution and, if required, by external bodies.

Second, each year there would be census surveys of particular subject areas. The subjects to be surveyed would be chosen on a rota basis to coincide with the timetable for Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) subject reviews. The subject-based sample would allow in-depth examination of particular subject areas institutionally and nationally.

-
- (iii) Within the sample size provided, each institution would be responsible for ensuring that a target response rate (say 60%) is achieved. Completed questionnaires would be returned to HESA who would inform institutions of the outstanding questionnaires (so that reminders could be sent) and take responsibility for computer scanning of the results, linking with the main student database and returning datasets to institutions within an agreed timescale.
- 17 Were the above proposals to be adopted, the resultant data would provide an authoritative picture on a national and institutional level of all subject areas on a regular basis to coincide with the quality assurance cycle; it would also provide a reliable picture of general trends on an annual basis. The use of a sampling methodology and the combination of centralised and institution-level data collection and processing would take advantage of economies of scale and minimise the resource implications for institutions.
- 18 By developing links between the subject-based periodic census and the QAA's subject review cycle, this approach would develop incentives for institutions seriously to consider employment issues whilst ensuring that the information is used in context.
- 19 As an interim arrangement prior to the full implementation of the above two-survey 'tracking' method, it is proposed that annual sample surveys of graduates from part-time courses be introduced following the methods employed for the survey undertaken as part of this project.

A COMMENT ON PERFORMANCE INDICATORS

- 20 The possible adoption of performance indicators of 'employability' requires comment. Were such indicators to be adopted, we see no sound reason why part-time students should be excluded. Public availability of employment indicators would both encourage accountability and assist student and employer choice. However, such indicators need to be accurate and fair. Consequently, it is recommended that:
- (i) a range of indicators is used since reliance on any one (income, employment status, managerial responsibilities, type of occupation) is likely to distort the picture;
- (ii) institutions' performance should be assessed by comparison with an adjusted sectoral average in order that access priorities are not compromised and the

diversity and flexibility of the sector maintained. This average should take into account several factors: age, which obviously affects the relation between students' careers and their study; gender, since there are strong links between career patterns and gender; ethnicity, for the same reason; qualification aim, to ensure that like is being compared with like; and subject of study, since different subjects impact on careers over a different time-span and since the composition of students in terms of career motivation varies between subjects¹. For part-time students – less geographically mobile – the characteristics of the local and regional labour market should be taken into account;

- (iii) these data, in addition to providing public information, could be used as a trigger for further scrutiny. If, for instance, an institution's performance appeared consistently below the adjusted sectoral average, this could be the basis for further investigation to discover whether underlying problems can be found. Equally, if an institution's performance were consistently above the adjusted sectoral average, then it could provide a source of examples of better practice for the rest of the sector.

¹ The survey report details these patterns. Note especially the relation between subject of study and motivations for study. If a subject attracts a large number of students who are not primarily interested in advancing their careers, it is likely to achieve a lower overall performance in terms of career improvement than a subject which only attracts students interested in career improvement, **even if** the first subject provides greater career progression for those students who do seek career improvement.

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background

As part of its Higher Education and Employment Development Programme, the Department for Education and Employment (DfEE) funded a group of universities and national higher education agencies to conduct a feasibility study of the collection of employment data on part-time students, graduates and diplomates. The project was one of seven funded by the DfEE to promote the use of labour market intelligence in higher education in order to “enable higher education to respond better to the changing needs and expectations of both employers and individuals at the local/regional level” (DfEE, 1997, p22).

The provision of part-time courses – at sub-degree, first degree and postgraduate levels – is one of the important ways in which many higher education institutions attempt to meet local and regional needs. Part-time courses recruit a great diversity of students in terms of age, background and reasons for study. Many students are in full-time employment in parallel with their studies and many, although by no means all, are supported in their studies in various ways by their employers. Yet debates about employability of graduates frequently neglect the experiences of people who have studied part-time. The most commonly-used source of data on graduate employment – the First Destinations Survey (FDS) – excludes part-timers. Data on the employment experiences of people who have obtained their higher education through part-time routes are not routinely available within higher education institutions.

The study had two main aims:

- (i) to examine the feasibility of extending the collection of information on the employment of graduates to include part-time students/graduates, taking into account changes in their employment during and after their course of study;
- (ii) to examine, with a small group of institutions and some of their local employers, the ways in which employment information of this kind can best be used to improve the relevance of higher education provision to part-time students and employers through improved planning, course design and delivery; to provide better advice on local career and employment opportunities; and to achieve a greater customer focus in higher education provision.

The focus of the study was, thus, on the institutional use of employment data. However, during the course of the project, national developments in the consideration of ‘employability’ as a performance indicator of institutions produced a changed political context to the project.

This could not be taken into account in the project design, but it is addressed in the project's conclusions and recommendations.

1.2 The project

The study commenced in September 1998, with research work completed by June 1999. QSC was responsible for running the project in collaboration with the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA), Anglia Polytechnic University, Nottingham Trent University, the Open University, Sheffield Hallam University, University of Westminster, University of Wolverhampton, and the Association of Graduate Careers Advisory Services (AGCAS).

The project was conducted in three main phases. *The first phase* aimed to assess the needs of the partner institutions and the sector more broadly for employment data on part-time students, graduates and diplomates. This aim was achieved through interviews within the six partner universities, a postal consultation with a wide range of higher education institutions, and interviews with employers and other interested parties.

The aim of the *second phase* was to investigate the feasibility of collecting employment data on part-time students, graduates and diplomates. This was achieved through a pilot survey of 6,000 current and former part-time students from the six partner universities. The findings of the survey, consultation with the institutions involved and with HESA allowed an assessment of the practical possibilities for regular collection of employment data from such students in the future.

The *third and final phase* of the project consisted of work with the six universities to help them use the data produced from the survey. The main elements of this were processing and analysis of the data by HESA, and a one-day seminar held in London for those involved in using the data at institutional level.

The work of the project was guided and assisted by a steering group, chaired by Tim O'Shea, Master of Birkbeck College and including representatives from each of the universities involved, HESA, the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education, the Higher Education Funding Council for England, the Committee of Vice-chancellors and Principals, the Department for Education and Employment, the Council for Industry and Higher Education, and the Association of Graduate Careers Advisory Services. A list of the membership can be found in Appendix V.

The focus of this project, as agreed with the Department for Education and Employment, was on provision at undergraduate degree and sub-degree level. However, part-time postgraduate provision is rapidly growing and for many institutions constitutes the bulk of their part-time work. Consequently, while the findings of the feasibility study are primarily orientated towards

undergraduate provision, they should also be considered with regard to postgraduates. Indeed, it is at this level that employment considerations may be especially important.

1.3 **The outcomes**

This report is one of several outcomes from the project. It contains descriptions of the project, analysis of the evidence collected, reports from the institutions involved, and recommendations for the future. A second report contains substantive analysis of the data collected by the survey, and what we can learn from them about the employment experiences of part-time students, graduates and diplomates. Finally, an end-of-project seminar, held in November 1999, disseminated the findings to and promoted discussion amongst a broader audience.

1.4 **Structure of this report**

This report aims to provide an overall assessment of the *feasibility* and *utility* of collecting employment data on part-time students, graduates and diplomates, and to recommend the most practical and productive ways in which this might be done.

It is structured in line with how the research itself was conducted. Chapter two deals with the needs analysis which formed the first part of the study, and reports the evidence gathered and considers its implications.

Chapters three and four deal with the second phase of the project, the pilot survey. The design of the questionnaire and the technical success of the survey in terms of response rates, levels of response to questions and so on are dealt with in chapter three, where recommendations about how the questionnaire could be improved for future use can also be found.

Chapter four addresses issues of the use of data and chapter five contains the general recommendations from the project. It draws together the evidence from the previous chapters to recommend several possible options for future collection of employment data on part-time students, graduates and diplomates.

The appendices included in the report cover the questionnaires used in the survey and an assessment of them; the costs of the survey; reports from the six participating universities on their experiences of administering the survey and possible uses of the data; and the membership of the steering group.

2. NEEDS ANALYSIS

Before setting out to examine the *feasibility* of collecting employment data on part-time students, graduates and diplomates it was necessary to examine what the information *needs* of higher education institutions were. Could such data make a contribution to “the improvement of planning and development processes within HEIs with respect to the better incorporation of local and regional labour market perspectives”? (Project proposal)

The first phase of the project attempted to assess whether employment data on part-time students, graduates and diplomates were needed, and if so, what sort of information was required. Current practice in the partner universities was examined and the possible uses of employment data on part-timers analysed. To these ends the relevant literature was reviewed, a wide range of higher education institutions were consulted and interviews carried out with staff in the six partner universities and employers.

2.1 Previous work in the field

Previous research on the responsiveness of the UK higher education system to employment needs provides a useful background. It gives a picture of how higher education tries to ensure that its provision meets the needs of the local, regional and national economy, and the role that employment data do and can play in this.

Higher education is highly diverse and this is reflected in analyses of the ‘system’s’ responsiveness to employment needs. There is great variation in the extent and form of institutions’ *information* about employment needs and their *responsiveness* to it.

Binks and Otter (1998) suggest that “... there is no single approach to planning and labour market issues across all universities ...” (Binks and Otter, 1998:p217). Different institutions may be more or less responsive to local and regional employment issues, but this variation does not occur systematically, for instance, along the old binary divide. “Whilst the institutions that are most vulnerable ... may be the most willing to mould their course offerings to external wishes, it is also true that some of the more powerful institutions have been among the most opportunistic in reading off the needs and wishes of external sponsors.” (CNAA, 1989:p15). Nor is such responsiveness a simple function of “... university size and disciplinary diversity”. (Binks and Otter, 1998).

A range of different forms of ‘labour market intelligence’ are available to institutions; these sources are “highly dispersed” (Otter nd:p4) and institutions may vary in the sources that they are able and willing to use. For instance, Binks and Otter (1998) list a total of 15 sources of information, ranging from “visiting professorial staff and fellows created specifically to provide

links to business and industry” and “local employers involved in student projects” to “university-generated performance indicators” (Binks and Otter, 1998:pp218-219). Again, no simple correlation with institution characteristics can be inferred.

Studies have acknowledged the crucial role played by disciplines in organising academic life (e.g. Becher, 1989]. Furthermore, the structure of most UK universities is such that “ ... both the planning and execution of policy (depends) on the motivation of individual teachers and basic units” (CNAA, 1989:p17) and “[c]onnections with external academic and employment systems are mainly at the basic unit level, and are variable between subjects” (CNAA, 1989:p14). It is not surprising, then, that substantial variation in responsiveness to employment needs by discipline can be observed. Different subject areas vary in their relation to employment (e.g. some are tightly coupled to a particular career, such as medicine; some are ‘vocational’ but linked to a range of careers, such as some applied science subjects; and others provide a more general base, such as many humanities subjects). These differences will affect not only the responsiveness of disciplines to employment needs, but also the means by which they are informed of them. Disciplines also vary in the pressures that they must face, and this affects responsiveness to employment needs; for instance, practitioners of a discipline struggling to attract students may be more inclined to find ways to improve the ‘employability’ of their courses (see Boys et al, 1988 for a detailed study on some of these issues).

Beyond noting this diversity, however, evaluation of the general responsiveness of UK higher education to local, regional and even national employment needs has been mixed. One recent study argues that “ ... unlike a business enterprise situated in a similar supply chain position, universities devote relatively little resource to ‘marketing’ their products (as graduates) or to responding to signals about what the market wants. They have a ‘sales department’, in the form of a Careers Service, which may have few mechanisms to match output ... to customer needs” (DfEE, 1998:p35). The report concludes that “ ... the area of higher education is not characterised by a strong tradition of research informed policy and decision making ... in terms of the use of research to guide actions, universities seldom mobilise their own skills” (DfEE, 1998:p63).

The specific issue of the use of and need for *employment data*, as opposed to the more general topic of labour market intelligence, has received rather less attention. Likewise part-time students; what research there is emphasises the under-representation of part-timers in institutional considerations and national policy decisions (e.g. Schuller, Raffe, Morgan-Klein and Clark, 1999).

One of the most notable characteristics of *part-time students* (as opposed to their full-time counterparts) is their connection to the local area (Tight, 1991:p99). The vast majority of students choose an institution near where they live (and usually work) – by contrast with full-

timers, very few part-time students relocate when they start higher education. Equally, the vast majority are employed in the same area. Therefore part-time higher education has a particularly regional focus: the skills it develops are largely drawn from its region, meet the needs of employers in that region, and stay in that region afterwards. If universities and other higher education institutions are to “embrace the role of ... enhancing the stock of human capital in (their) region(s)” (Goddard, 1999:p37) then an increasing awareness of local economic needs in developing their part-time provision may be one of their most effective routes.

The relationship to employment of part-time study requires an alternative conceptualisation to the traditional ‘serial’ relationship assumed for full-time students. The latter may be increasingly inappropriate to the diverse student body on full-time courses, but it is certainly unhelpful to an understanding of the circumstances of part-timers. Thus, the serial relationship of a period of full-time study being followed by a lifetime of full-time work (‘destinations’) has to be replaced by something rather more complex. Most part-timers have been in employment prior to entering higher education – often for substantial periods, many continue in employment during their study and are therefore not faced with the same job search urgency at the end of their courses as full-time students. Part-time study may affect employment well before graduation. Indeed, it would be surprising if the development of new competencies, aspirations and confidence through study had no effect on employment experiences taking place in parallel; the relationship of part-time study to employment cannot be reduced to a ‘simple’ question of graduate destinations. The complexity of the relationship has implications for the collection and analysis of information. The use of information which ignores such complexities is likely to be unhelpful and misleading.

Previous research in the field suggests that the responsiveness to, extent and type of labour market information in higher education vary between institutions and subject areas. Institutions use a range of different sources of information, in different ways and with differing levels of enthusiasm. The ability to respond to employment needs gets different priorities among institutions and indeed among the different departments and academic units within them. The distinctive situation and needs of part-time students is an under-researched area and a frequently ignored issue in institutional and national policy processes.

2.2 Experiences of the six partner universities

The main work in the needs analysis was done jointly with all six partner universities. Interviews were carried out with key staff in all six institutions, including senior staff, course organisers, planning staff and careers service personnel. More than 40 people were interviewed. The universities also each produced a written account of their practice regarding the collection and use of employment data.

There is currently only very limited information collected on the employment of part-time students. Some institutions use an entry questionnaire to record the background of their students; others draw on invoicing information for sponsored students. These methods have obvious limitations, however; ongoing information collection is required if changes in employment during study are to be apparent, and data are required on non-sponsored as well as sponsored students. More importantly, little use if any is made of this data and usually only the most minimal information (e.g. name of employer) is obtained. Often, this information is collected and recorded as part of the enrolment procedure but is not accessible to careers staff or to schools, faculties or departments.

It appears that only the Open University currently surveys the employment of part-timers *after graduating*. Even in this case the survey is (at present) only carried out every five years. Again, little real use is made of this information as a guide to labour market trends; rather it is used to monitor opportunities and progression. In most universities, periodic 'one-off' studies are carried out. However, these are extremely patchy and less attention has been paid to part-timers than full-timers.

The most important, and in most cases the only, centrally and regularly collected source of data on *graduate* employment is the HESA First Destinations Survey (FDS). This is for full-time graduates only. Data collection patterns here are very similar since all institutions are operating to meet statutory requirements. Data are collected six months after graduation and are limited to employment status (e.g. full-time work, study, unemployment), type of work and type of employer.

The resultant data are used in five main areas within institutions:

- (i) Course and curriculum development
- (ii) Institutional planning
- (iii) Quality assurance
- (iv) Careers and guidance
- (v) Marketing

In these areas, employment data are used alongside other sources of information to get a picture of the needs of the labour market. These other information sources are:

- (i) employment data on students and graduates;
- (ii) other 'demand' indicators, e.g. student demand for courses or modules, extent of sponsorship, etc;
- (iii) general labour market information, e.g. skills surveys, macroeconomic data, etc;
- (iv) employer involvement in university activities, e.g. employers sitting on validation boards, being involved in course design or in the governance of the university. This

-
- involvement may be between particular universities or the system as a whole, and particular employers, groups of employers or professional bodies;
- (v) university involvement in employment, e.g. students' work (especially in the case of part-time students) or consultancy or other work undertaken by staff.

Each of these sources of information has particular strengths and weaknesses. They are also used in differing combinations for different purposes. The contribution and role of employment data vary correspondingly.

(i) *Course and curriculum development*

Although the development and design of courses and curricula have a key role in shaping the skills and knowledge that students can gain through their experience of higher education, employment information is generally only indirectly involved. The case studies did not reveal any cases where courses had been designed on the basis of FDS data or rethought around the results of alumni surveys.

This is quite understandable given the nature of the data involved. It is not possible simply to read off from the results of the First Destinations Survey, or indeed more in-depth one-off studies, the implications for course and curriculum design. The valuable contribution that these exercises can (and do) make to the design and development of courses and curricula is as a check, as a pointer to further investigation. All the institutions involved place some requirement on courses undergoing validation or approval to demonstrate employment demand for the subject in question, which very often involves use of the First Destinations data. "We think in terms of enhancing employability, and if none of our graduates actually find employment then clearly we're not succeeding" commented one interviewee (based in a social science faculty). These data are also presented to course boards or other supervisory committees for monitoring. Of course, the value of these procedures depends upon the commitment of those involved, and this can vary considerably. In the main, however, they cannot be applied to part-time courses because of the absence of data.

There was much general support amongst those involved in course and curriculum development for collecting employment data on part-timers. The mechanisms that currently consider data relating to full-timers have no input regarding part-time students and many staff agreed that this lack of representation could lead to their interests being ignored.

To provide more detailed information, direct links with the world of work, either through employer involvement in university activities or vice versa, seem to be of key significance for making courses 'employment-relevant', especially in more vocational fields. Employers are brought in on course validation and review panels, are used as external examiners, and collaborate in placement schemes and in some cases co-design courses. These contacts

input directly and indirectly into course and curriculum design. The remarks of the head of a computing faculty are typical:

“Employers engage with us very actively ... we rely ... heavily on our advisory groups, on our industry contacts, and on our sandwich year placements.”

For instance regarding placement schemes, one interviewee (the head of a law course) reported that “employers are quite touchy if students don’t come up to their expectations of what students should look and sound and act like”, and the course had to be shaped to fit. A very important indirect source of employer input into course and curriculum development comes via professional bodies. The same interviewee summed this up succinctly:

“The profession say to the Law Society ... we must have students who have studied contract and tort and criminal law and so on and so forth, and without this the product of the law school is no good to us. So the Law Society tells us that’s what we must have ... in a sense we are already subject to the demands of the profession, it’s just that it reaches us in a different way.”

However, this form of linkage is obviously only possible where there are strong connections between a particular course and a particular profession. In less directly vocational subjects, other links are often harder to establish. Staff in humanities and social science faculties who try to bring in employers may meet little support. One head of a social science faculty reported that:

“From time to time, we have done things like writing to local employers in a particular area, inviting them to come in, inviting them to comment on the sorts of courses we offer and so on. The response rate, I have to say, is very poor to that sort of initiative.”

Departments and courses are strongly motivated to maximise student demand, as the existence and funding of their courses is dependent upon numbers. This demand may, in the long run, relate to the perceived employability of graduates from the course in question although many other factors affect student choice.

(ii) *Institutional planning*

Employment data are used significantly in institutional decision-making procedures such as allocation of student numbers, investment and so on. Here, they are used largely as a performance indicator. “(I)t sits alongside other performance indicators so one has an all round picture” reported one pro-vice chancellor. However, it is sometimes used more substantively. One institution described how HND provision had been wound down after

destinations information showed that it was largely used for access to degree courses (it was replaced with more efficient and effective routes into degrees).

Staff in the partner universities expressed disappointment that no employment data were available regarding the part-time population so that performance in that area could be monitored as the full-time courses are currently.

Again, whilst there are many good intentions to use employment data, student demand is, without a doubt, the main driving force in planning decisions. One planning officer explained the processes: “There’s a lot of gut feeling around, seeing what other people are doing, which are the popular courses.” Considering that student numbers are vital for income, that they should be given a high priority in the plans for the institution is not surprising. This is even more so in institutions that are facing recruitment difficulties, as are several of the partner universities in this study. (One interviewee reported that “demand has slumped so badly there are people out there shaking the trees for new students”.)

Other employment data, such as that provided by the DfEE Skills Survey, are quite widely used within planning and administrative departments but staff are often bewildered by the range on offer, and in any event their efforts often fail to penetrate their institutions more broadly.

(iii) Quality assurance

FDS information is used to meet the requirements of QAA procedures. Furthermore, as mentioned above, it is used as an internal check and performance indicator. Employment data are well suited to this sort of ‘monitoring’ function, tending to suggest further issues rather than being treated as an authoritative diagnosis. However, the absence of such indicators for part-time students means that the safeguards are only in place for full-timers.

Other demand indicators, and particularly student demand, are used in internal review and validation procedures. However, employability is not the only or even the main focus of quality assurance. In some respects, it seems likely that the absence of valid and reliable information about graduate employment limits the extent to which employability is given serious attention within quality assurance processes. Academic staff are rightly sceptical of the relevance of what little information that exists to the increasing complexity of the relationship between higher education and employment.

(iv) Careers and guidance

The information from the FDS is collected by careers services and is used by them in a number of ways. It is analysed and presented in national publications such as “What

Graduates Do". It is used to indicate who the major employers of an institution's graduates are, so that further links can be developed. It is made available to students to inform their decision-making. It is analysed and provided to relevant schools, departments and decision-making bodies. Careers services are also often involved in other one-off, collaborative or external research projects and these are used in similar ways.

Careers services draw upon a wide range of labour market information, and are generally well informed about the sources available. Co-ordination between careers services makes this easier.

Careers services are generally geared towards full-time students and although many have made efforts to become accessible and helpful to a broader population, the absence of general employment data for part-time students was reported as a significant hindrance to their capacity by many interviewees.

(v) *Marketing*

FDS information is used as a 'selling point' for courses and institutions because it can be used as a mark of the employability of their graduates. Information on the employers of part-time students, where it is collected, is used by some institutions to help them target their marketing strategy (i.e. if they know the characteristics of their prospective students, they have a better idea who to try to 'sell' to). Other employment data, where available, can be drawn upon for the same purposes.

Interviewees expressed strong support for the collection of employment data on part-time students as a potential 'selling point', to be used either in absolute terms or by comparison with the rest of the sector. Participants were particularly keen to point to the potential benefits in attempting to market higher education to small- and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), for whom the benefits of assisting employees in study are often perceived as less than tangible.

2.3 The national postal survey of higher education institutions

To complement the case study interviews, a postal questionnaire was sent out to the vice-chancellors of 136 higher education institutions in England, Wales and Northern Ireland. These 136 represent all the institutions funded by Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE), Higher Education Funding Council for Wales (HEFCW) and the Department of Education Northern Ireland (DENI), less the partners in this project (which does not cover Scotland). The questionnaire was generally open-ended, asking for descriptions of the institutions' current practice regarding the assessment of employer needs, and particularly what sorts of information were collected and how it was used.

The response was good, with 61 institutions replying and the pattern of returns reflecting the make-up of the sector (e.g. pre- and post-1992 institutions, universities and colleges) well. The open-ended nature of the questions asked and the fact that responses were usually provided by careers services (who will not necessarily know all that goes on in a particular institution and would not necessarily be thought by all in that institution to speak for them) do suggest that caution should be used in interpreting the results. However, they do provide an interesting background to the more detailed work done with the partner universities in this project.

All of the responses received mentioned (and usually focused on) the HESA First Destinations Survey. Few responses reported any additional regular data collection, and one-off studies are infrequent. Only two institutions reported regular collection of employment information on part-timers, by simply including them in the FDS mail-out – generally, institutions seem to be stretching their resources to collect data on full-timers without any further extension.

Indications as to how employment information is used once collected were not entirely clear. Several responses were careful to point to the limits to the contribution of employment data: “We are inclined to the view that the information derived from this data may be reliable as an indicator of the institutional performance, but that it is not sufficiently reliable for any analysis of that performance” reported one respondent.

However, there also seem to be fairly established ways for this data to be made available to those involved in course and curriculum development processes. There is widespread evidence that employment data are presented by careers services for use at institution level planning.

The majority of institutions that responded noted the requirement of the old Teaching Quality Assessments and the new Quality Assurance Agency framework for evidence of the employability of students, usually presented in the form of First Destinations information. The use of these data in careers and guidance and marketing were also generally reported.

In general, the evidence from the postal survey suggests that institutional collection of employment data is largely restricted to the First Destinations Survey. The evidence also suggests that institutions vary in the extent and manner in which they use other sources of information, particularly direct contact with employers, and the role that the careers service plays in facilitating such contact.

The postal survey seems to support the findings of the interviews in the partner universities.

2.4 Employers and other information users

In addition to the interviews with members of staff in the partner universities, and the postal survey of the higher education sector, a number of interviews were carried out with employers. These interviews were intended to explore their perspectives on links with higher education, part-time study, and the need for employment information. The interviews were set up through the partner universities, so the representatives contacted were from organisations with links to higher education, although the nature of these links and the degree of satisfaction with their operation varied.

A total of ten interviewees were involved, representing six organisations: a Training and Enterprise Council (TEC), a large NHS Trust, a major automotive manufacturer, a major accountancy firm, a government agency, and a major high street retailer. This sample is obviously skewed towards larger companies; the TEC was included (amongst other reasons) to provide further insight on the position of small- and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs). Interviews were conducted on a semi-structured basis, and ranged in length from 30 to 70 minutes. Questions focused on the employers' links with higher education institutions and their views of those links, their perspectives on part-time study, and their views on the 'employment relevance' of higher education, and how employment data do and could contribute to that end.

Interviewees described links with higher education centring on teaching and research. Several of the employers interviewed are major purchasers of part-time study and so work closely with institutions to design courses:

“The links are not so much taking their standard degree programmes that they offer off the shelf but rather partnering with the universities to produce degree programmes to suit our particular needs.” (Manager of Training and Education, automotive manufacturer)

Another interviewee described how her firm (a high street retailer) was closely involved in the design of a new course. She had been seconded to the university in question for a year to take responsibility for the BA in Fashion Merchandising. Her employer's involvement here, she said, was the result of enlightened self-interest: they had sponsored the course and provided her services to fill a perceived need in the labour market. “That's what it's all about – industry perceiving a need, helping themselves.”

Employers with less purchasing power, however, may have less input into courses. An interviewee from a government agency which sponsors a (relatively small) number of students through the law degree programme at the local university described the relatively

little influence that she felt she had. Consequently course options were often not orientated towards the “quite minority” interests of her students. This problem will impact particularly on SMEs.

There was more scepticism about the role of employer representation on advisory committees, liaison programmes and so on. TEC interviewees expressed scepticism about some of the forums, conventions and consultations that they had been involved with. In particular, these arrangements tend to exist formally but with little substantive impact:

“We’ve had a Higher Education Forum in the city for a number of years ... because it was a talking shop people would turn up, present papers, they’d be duly noted and nothing would happen.” (Education Manager, TEC)

A final method of linking with teaching, as noted above, is provided through professional organisations. An interviewee from an accounting firm described how recent pressure from “big five” firms had led the Institute of Chartered Accountants to revise the assessment and structure of its professional courses to give greater flexibility for the employees to balance study and work. Professional organisations may also provide opportunities for smaller businesses to have a voice in setting standards for training and education.

Most of the employers interviewed were very enthusiastic about the responsiveness of the higher education institutions that they deal with to their needs. A training and education manager at a motor manufacturer praised the willingness of the university his firm worked with to adapt to provide courses over weekends, to use distance learning and generally to use innovative methods to meet employer needs. The director of education and training at a major NHS trust described her partner university as “very responsive ... very employer-focused, it is very keen that we are in the driving seat”.

The interviewees were generally satisfied with their dealings with particular higher education institutions. However, they also frequently expressed doubts about the responsiveness of the system as a whole, and hoped that it would be improved:

“I would like to see higher education working very closely with employers in developing curricula that meet a range of needs.” (Director of Education and Training, NHS Trust)

“Probably some people are informed about employer needs, but not everybody, not necessarily the people who design courses.” (Education Manager, TEC)

TEC interviewees also suggested that higher education could be more forthcoming in providing data on employment for outside users:

“A lot of the data that universities are producing on output, first destinations and so on is seen as of value to academic institutions and of value to employers but it is not seen as of value to other partners ... for instance on inward investment inquiries the TEC needs the data, the local authority needs the data.” (Research Manager, TEC)

2.5 **Need for employment information on students, graduates and diplomates from part-time courses**

Previous research in the field suggests that higher education institutions use a range of sources of information on employment needs in their decision-making. They are often successful in acting to meet those needs, but not always. The case studies of our partner institutions support these claims. Institutions collect employment data, largely in the form of the First Destinations Survey. These data are used alongside other sources of information, particularly direct contact with employers.

Custom and practice in the use of employment data varies considerably between and within institutions². For some courses, the availability of employment data from students and graduates might do little more than confirm what is already known through other sources. For other courses, particularly those with more diverse and unplanned links to employment, data from students and graduates might provide new insights and alter existing perceptions. For all courses, employment data from students and graduates can provide an important corrective to information and perceptions obtained from employers.

The absence of employment information on part-timers is almost uniform across the sector and effectively excludes the interests of the part-time student population from representation or consideration on equal terms with full-timers in many important decision-making processes. Given that part-timers are generally much more ‘local’ than full-timers, developing part-time provision may provide a particularly profitable means of contributing to local and regional economies. But the general absence of information on the employment of part-timers means that the extent of this contribution is insufficiently recognised and assessed. It also means that evidence on which to base improvements to existing practice is frequently absent.

For full-time courses, first destinations data are used alongside other sources of information for a wide variety of institutional purposes. It was not the aim of this study to investigate the effectiveness of these institutional processes. It was in the nature of the study that our

² **Other resources for labour market intelligence**

Staff in higher education wishing to find out more about the uses of Labour Market Intelligence may find the resources compiled by the Universities for the North-East group valuable. They can be found at <http://www.unis4ne.ac.uk/employ/lmiacad.htm#contents>

attention was drawn to the work of people within institutions who were committed to improving employment linkages. Such people almost universally regretted the absence of information on the employment experiences of students and graduates from part-time courses. What such information should consist of is another matter. The limitations of the FDS were widely recognised as were the rather different circumstances of part-time students. Although there was agreement that information would need to include FDS-type data on employment status, type of work and type of employer, there were also doubts about the adequacy of this information and about when and how it should be collected. These were issues that were addressed in *Phase Two* of the project.

3. THE SURVEY: TECHNICAL ISSUES

The second phase of the project was the development and execution of an employment survey of 6,000 current and former students from the six partner universities. The findings of the first phase of the project were used to determine the form and content of the questionnaire.

3.1 Survey design

As noted previously, the relationship between employment and part-time study differs from that with full-time study in a number of respects. The serial nature of the relationship cannot be assumed. Students will vary significantly in their prior employment experiences and their current employment aspirations. Their experiences of study may impact upon their employment situation at any time, not just at the completion of their studies. Employers may be 'interested parties' throughout the students' higher education: the issue for the employer may be less one of graduate recruitment and much more one of staff development, re-development and promotion. For these reasons, FDS-type information on employment status, type of work and type of employer six months after graduation, although needed, is insufficient in the case of part-time students.

Accordingly, the survey was designed with the following features:

- data were collected from recent graduates *and* from currently enrolled students;
- FDS-type information on employment status, type of work and type of employment was collected;
- the above information was augmented by information on the student's background, aspirations, job changes since starting the course, and additional information about their employment (e.g. hours worked, income).

The information collected by the survey was linked via the HESA student record to information already held on the students in the sample.

Many of those involved in the first phase of the project raised doubts about the likelihood of obtaining a viable response rate from part-time students, graduates and diplomates. It was suggested that such students perceive less strong ties with their institution and so feel less obliged to respond to initiatives such as this survey. To help maximise the number of responses, the questionnaire was kept as short as possible, and the former students were questioned relatively soon after completing their courses.

For the purposes of this survey, each of the participating universities was asked to provide a sample of 500 current and 500 former students, matching as closely as possible the subject balance of their institution.

Current students were defined as those half-way through their courses. The cohort of former students was defined as those who graduated in the academic year 1997-1998. Choosing this cohort has obvious disadvantages, since they are only relatively recently graduated and so may not have been able to develop their careers in light of their qualifications yet. However, response rates tend to decline the longer the intervening period between completion of the course and the time of the survey, as a consequence of accumulating changes of address and of reduced willingness amongst subjects to respond. In light of the concerns raised in the first phase about the likely response rate, it was decided to use a relatively recent cohort to maximise returns. Such timing had the advantage of similarity to that used for the FDS.

Institutions were asked to select samples to reflect the balance of degree and sub-degree courses in their universities. In the event, a number of institutions also included some post-graduate students in their samples.

Liaison with HESA ensured that the data from the questionnaires could be integrated with Student Records information, allowing access to further data on age, length of study, ethnicity, gender and so eliminating the need to enquire about these factors in the questionnaire itself.

3.2 Questionnaire design

The questionnaire was designed by the project team in consultation with the steering group, HESA and the liaison officers at the partner universities. Other surveys such as the FDS template, the British Employment Survey and previous employment surveys used by the Open University and the Council for National Academic Awards were used for reference.

Two questionnaires were produced, one for current and one for former students (Appendix I). They contained a common core, with an additional section (on further study) and some altered wording for former students.

After consultation with HESA, it was decided to design the questionnaires to be read by optical character reading scanning. Computer scanning dramatically reduces the staff time needed to input data and so enables questionnaire data to be entered at a lower cost and in a shorter timescale. Given the resource pressures on institutions, the use of this technology was felt to be an important aspect of the feasibility study.

The questionnaires were devised to provide a number of indicators of individuals' employment situations *before* their courses and *at the time of questioning* to give a reasonably accurate picture of the development of their careers over that period. This information was augmented with self-report data on career changes. To allow more sophisticated analyses, and to allow for the diversity in composition and motivation of the part-time student population, a variety of socio-economic and motivational factors were also included (either from the questionnaire or from the student record data).

The questionnaires were divided into four sections common to both, plus an additional section on further study for former students.

The *first section asked general questions about students' background to study*: their employment status (before the course and now), their mode of study, and whether their employer had supported their study through paying course fees or allowing time off. In addition, respondents were asked the highest educational qualifications attained by their parents, providing data to be combined with information on age, gender and ethnicity to indicate possible barriers to participation in the labour market.

The *second section dealt with respondents' main work activity before their course and now*. 'Work' was used comprehensively to include voluntary work and self-employment. The definition of 'main' was left to respondents, due to the problems of using income, hours worked or other purportedly objective criteria which may only poorly reflect the significance of activities for the students, graduates and diplomates. Subjects were asked for their job title, the activity and location of their employer, the size of their employer (in the UK as a whole), managerial responsibilities, whether their work was paid or voluntary, and whether they had any other paid work at the time. Job title and organisation activity were signified by a text field and by the use of a self-coding sheet with categories derived from the Standard Industrial Classification (SIC) and the Standard Occupational Classification (SOC). Self-coding was preferred largely for resource reasons, as noted above a key factor in the feasibility of the exercise.

The *third section looked for information overall on the respondents' situations before starting their courses and at the time of asking*: for all their work, how many hours per week did they work and how much did they earn?

Section four enquired into respondents' perceptions of the relation between their course and their careers. They were asked to assess whether they had experienced career changes since starting their course, and to what extent their course had contributed to these changes. They were also asked whether they anticipated further career changes in the next five years. Finally, they were asked to what extent they were motivated to take their course to help with

their career or out of interest/other personal reasons, and to what extent they had a particular occupation in mind when starting their course.

Former students were asked a fifth set of questions, regarding any further study or training that they might be undertaking at the time of questioning. They were questioned on the qualification aim of their study or training, the hours per week spent in formal study or training, and their motivations for undertaking it.

3.3 **Distribution of questionnaires**

Questionnaires were sent out by the partner institutions in early March 1999. Each had a label attached to it displaying the student's Unique Student Identifier number, to enable integration with the HESA Student Record database. Covering letters were written by the partner universities according to an agreed template, and a coding sheet (listing two-figure codes for different categories of occupation and organisation activity) and a reply-paid envelope were included.

Reminder postcards were sent out three weeks after the initial mailing. Replacement questionnaires were sent out to any participants who requested them.

The main batch of questionnaires was sent to be scanned in late April. A few questionnaires arrived after this date: data from these were manually entered into the records.

3.4 **Responses**

Completed questionnaires were received from 2,078 graduates and students. The overall *response rate* was 36%. As can be seen from the table below, this varied between institutions³:

Total variation between institutions cannot be accounted for by different mail-out dates, since Westminster was amongst the first to send out its questionnaires and Anglia amongst the latest. In no cases were significant numbers of questionnaires returned undelivered.

The difference in response rate between current and former students was small: a 37% response from the former and a 35% response from the latter. This probably reflects the relatively low geographical mobility of part-time students. Contact details are reasonably stable.

³ Tables include all sample, postgraduate and undergraduate. Inconsistencies in totals are due to cases where HESA Student Record data are not available.

Table 1: Response rates for the six institutions

Institution	Responses	Sent out	Response rate %
Anglia Polytechnic University	293	917	32
Nottingham Trent University	393	940	42
Open University	557	1000	56
Sheffield Hallam University	319	908	35
University of Westminster	240	1078	22
University of Wolverhampton	276	977	28
TOTAL	2,078	5,820	36

An overall response rate of 36% from a single mail-out with a reminder postcard is comparable with the figures achieved at the same stage of the First Destinations Survey and by other surveys of students and graduates. The much higher final response rate for First Destinations is achieved through multiple questionnaires, telephone follow-ups and other techniques. Consequently, there appears to be no dramatic difference between the difficulties in obtaining responses from part-time and full-time students. It seems likely that, through use of a second questionnaire and some telephone reminders a response rate of around 60% could be achieved. One of the institutions in the survey was already close to this with a 56% response rate. If the same level of resources as are devoted to the FDS for full-time students were devoted to part-time students, there seems no reason to believe that similar response rates would not be obtained.

Response rates showed considerable *variation by gender*.

Table 2: Response rates by gender

Gender	Responses	Sent out	Response rate %
Women	1140	2855	40
Men	938	2966	32

There is also a significant correlation between *age* and the likelihood of subjects to respond. However, this may be linked to differences between institution (the Open University students were on average older).

Table 3: Response rates by age

Age	Responses	Sent out	Response rate %
Under 21	69	270	26
21-24	235	947	25
25-29	361	1197	30
30-39	665	1854	36
40-49	496	1037	48
50 and over	231	451	51
Unknown	21	64	33

Equally, there is some variation in response rate by subject area; this, too, may be related to differences between institutions. In some cases, small cell sizes preclude drawing too many conclusions about general response patterns for subjects.

Table 4: Response rates by subject area

Subject area	Responses	Sent out	Response rate %
Medicine	0	0	–
Subjects allied to medicine	125	325	38
Biological sciences	33	96	34
Veterinary science	0	0	–
Agriculture and related subjects	3	15	20
Physical sciences	44	145	30
Mathematical sciences	1	4	25
Computer science	46	205	22
Engineering and technology	115	413	28
Architecture, building and town planning	256	844	30
Social, economic and political studies	74	182	41
Law	149	480	31
Business and administrative studies	386	1249	31
Librarianship and information science	0	1	0
Languages	50	203	25
Humanities	13	26	50
Creative arts and design	22	66	33
Education	112	274	41
Combined	649	1293	50

3.5 Interviews with a small sample of respondents

To assess the reliability and validity of the data obtained from the survey, a small number of respondents (a former and a current student from each institution) were interviewed by telephone.

The replies provided by interviewees were highly consistent with their responses to the questionnaire, despite variations in question ordering and wording. This suggests that the data from the survey have a high level of reliability.

Interviewees described varied employment histories which were not always adequately captured by the 'before' and 'after' columns in the questionnaire. Firstly, a significant minority of interviewees had experienced more than one job change since starting their courses, which was not reflected in their survey responses because of the format of the questionnaire. Secondly, several interviewees had changed employment status (moving from full-time to part-time work or unemployment, and vice versa) because of changes in family responsibility. This is probably a more common occurrence for part-time students, amongst whom there are many more older students than amongst the full-time cohort, but the questionnaire did not collect information on family responsibilities that may affect career decisions. Thirdly and finally, two of the respondents interviewed, both of whom were "not in paid employment and looking for work" according to the survey, had in fact gained employment since completing the questionnaire. They both described how they had only been able to devote their full attention to looking for work after completing their courses. This casts doubt on the wisdom of surveying students so soon after completing their courses.

Despite these issues, interviewees' descriptions of their employment histories during their courses were consistent with the picture emerging from their responses to the questionnaire, and so it seems reasonable to attribute a satisfactory level of validity to the data produced by the survey.

The respondents generally rated the questionnaire as "good" or "very good", with no-one rating it less than satisfactory; none expressed problems filling it in generally or using the self-coding sheet in particular, although some (as described above) found it difficult to fit their employment histories to the template provided. Interviewees had no problems with the length of the questionnaire; a majority thought they would have filled it out if it were slightly longer but not if it were much longer (twice as long or more).

3.6 General conclusions on data collection

- Response rates were comparable to those obtained by similar surveys, and could have been increased by additional questionnaire mail-outs, telephone follow-ups, and so on. There is little evidence that address lists held by universities are inaccurate.
- Evidence from previous research on graduate employment (e.g. Brennan and McGeevor 1988) suggests that courses and qualifications do not have an immediate impact on careers, but rather that this effect is played out over time at different speeds according to factors such as the subject studied, the financial and personal situation of the graduate,

their career aims, and so on. This is supported by the follow-up interviews and by the large number of respondents to this survey (70%+) who anticipate promotion or other career changes in the five years after graduation. For graduates from part-time courses, the challenge is more likely to be one of 'changing a job' than 'obtaining a job'. As such, the fixed point of graduation is less significant than for graduates from full-time courses. Jobs may be changed before graduation or over a longish time after graduation, as opportunities offer themselves. Thus, snap-shot FDS-type surveys may be less appropriate to part-timers. Longitudinal or retrospective studies which can detect changes over longer periods should be considered. In particular, it would seem advisable that graduates and diplomates are not questioned immediately after completing their courses, but at a later point in time. This would recognise that graduates from part-time courses may be under no immediate pressure to 'obtain' a job but will be likely to change jobs over time as circumstances and opportunities allow.

- The response rate and the feedback from the interviews also suggests that a slightly longer questionnaire could be used, making it possible to get more detailed information on the employment experiences of the students, graduates and diplomates. The results of the sister study on graduate tracking in the North-East⁴ suggest that length of questionnaire does not have a significant impact on response rates.

3.7 General conclusions on questionnaire design

- The general design of the questionnaire seemed to be successful, with only a few questions posing problems to respondents⁵. If a tracking methodology were adopted (as proposed), then the format of the questionnaire could be significantly simplified. Questions 4.i-4.x could be redesigned without the "No, it hasn't happened" column to avoid confusion. The use of two columns marked "Just before your course" and "Now" would not be necessary, which would remove one of the major sources of inconsistency in the data and simplify the procedure for participants.
- The self-coding system caused problems for some respondents. However, the problems may have been more to do with the coding frame than the coding process, i.e. what is coded rather than who does the coding. This might be alleviated by redesigning the coding schemes, but it is not clear how to design a system that is simple enough for respondents to use it consistently and easily but which is also systematic and inclusive enough to make analysis practical. Any system of coding (self-coding or otherwise) is inevitably somewhat approximate; this is a trade-off with aggregation and ease of

⁴ The GREATS Project (Graduate Tracking System for North East Graduates) is being undertaken by the Universities of Sunderland and Newcastle Upon Tyne.

⁵ For detailed analysis of the questionnaire, see appendix II.

analysis. Consequently, decisions regarding the method of coding will be largely practical, related to the uses to which the data will be put.

- The content of the questionnaires will need fuller appraisal once institutions have gained more experience in using the data. (See also the second report of this project: 'Part-time Students and Employment: report of a survey of students and graduates'.) However, it seems reasonable to conclude that it is perfectly feasible to collect rather more extensive information about graduates than is collected by the FDS, information which in the case of part-timers takes better account of the complexities and contexts of the relationship between employment and part-time study.

4. THE USES OF EMPLOYMENT DATA

The aim of this project was to assess the feasibility and utility of collecting employment data on part-time students, graduates and diplomates, and to recommend the most practical and productive ways of doing so. This section looks at the value of the information collected from the pilot survey, its potential uses by higher education institutions and the factors likely to influence its future use.

4.1 Value of the information collected

The employment data collected as part of this project could be valuable to a number of interested parties. Within higher education, data can be used at national and institutional levels; they can also be of interest to current and prospective students, employers, those involved in policy decisions and a range of organisations such as TECs. Of course, the ways that the results of this one-off survey are used will be by no means identical to the ways in which regular data collection might be used; the much smaller scale, institutional focus and one-off nature of this project necessarily place restrictions on the extent of use.

The results of the questionnaire survey are available in a separate report. The findings of the overall project were also disseminated through an end of project seminar at which representatives from a wider group of institutions and national bodies participated. Even though institutions (other than the universities which participated in the project) will not have information relating to their own students, it is hoped that the evidence from this survey will prompt further consideration from a range of institutions. In particular, the results relating to the spread of employer support for part-time students and to the relationship between career progression and age will be of interest to many in higher education.

4.2 Institutions' use of the data from the project

In the context of this project, the main focus of information use is on the partner universities. During Phase Three of the project, participating institutions were asked to describe their plans for using the data from the survey. These plans were further discussed at a seminar held after the data had been provided to the universities.

The partner institutions varied in the extent to which they were able to provide plans and evidence of strategic use of the data from the survey. This variation should be noted and institutions should seek to clarify the intended use of employment data as a prerequisite for the collection of further information. In many cases a combination of practical assistance and external pressure may be needed to encourage a positive and active approach to the use of data. The ways in which this can best be achieved are discussed in the proposals below.

Institutional use of the survey data can be classed under the five headings used in the second section of the report:

(i) Course and curriculum design

Most of the partner institutions reported that information would be provided to individual schools in processed form, whilst two of the universities reported that they would be using information on particular schools where they had large samples to feed into ongoing subject reviews. Central review committees and bodies are also receiving the data to consider in annual performance and employability reviews.

(ii) Institutional planning

Two of the partner institutions report that the information will be used directly in making decisions about student recruitment targets, whilst general input into planning of student numbers decisions is more widespread. One institution is currently undertaking detailed research into the labour market position of ethnic minority graduates, and problems of 'over-education', to which these data will contribute.

(iii) Quality assurance

Whilst the one-off nature of this feasibility study limits its potential for inclusion in cyclical quality review processes, institutions will be using it in general quality monitoring programmes. A number of the liaison and steering group staff involved with the project in the partner universities are also involved in validation committees and processes, and so will be able to provide a direct input of the data into quality assurance.

(iv) Careers and guidance

Careers services at the partner institutions have expressed a strong interest in the data and in many cases will be crucially involved in the processing and presentation of the information to others within their universities. They will also be using the information themselves to provide advice to part-time students now and to consider how they might better adapt their strategy to improve service to part-timers in the future.

(v) Marketing

Institutions report two main routes for using the data from this project in marketing. Firstly, they will be used in publications and information to demonstrate the benefits of

part-time study to the student and to the employer. Secondly, they will be used to assist alumni offices in their work by providing a new picture of the composition of the population of former students.

4.3 **Limitations to use**

Graduate employment data are but one source of information used by institutions in the processes discussed above. Future uses of such data will be dependent upon a number of factors of which the most important are likely to be the following:

- external requirements: funding formulae and national quality assurance methodologies being key factors;
- institutional management: the existence of institutional frameworks and policies concerning the processes described in section 5.2 with properly resourced support mechanisms provided for their implementation;
- support mechanisms which include appropriate expertise in collection, analysis, interpretation and presentation of data to *meet* diverse institutional needs at different organisational levels;
- credibility of information collected to advise diverse constituencies, inside and outside higher education.

Although the above list might suggest a top-down approach to the use of employment data, the third and fourth factors are meant to reflect the traditions of devolved decision-making in many institutions. It is staff at basic unit or faculty levels who will be making key decisions about course design and quality assurance and it is they who will need to be convinced of the value and credibility of employment data if such data are to be put to genuine use. As far as part-time students are concerned, the complexities of their links to employment need to be reflected in any information collected – if it is not to be dismissed as misleading and unhelpful.

5 GENERAL RECOMMENDATIONS

The evidence of this project is that collecting employment data on part-time students, graduates and diplomates is both feasible and valuable. The final section of this report addresses the question of how such data might be collected in future and how the best balance between costs and benefits can be struck.

5.1 Approach to surveying

Possibly the most basic question is how many surveys to use. The current First Destinations Survey collects data from graduates once only, asking them about their employment status six months after graduation. However, this is not the only option:

- (i) *One-off collection after leaving the course, asking about employment status at that time (the FDS model):* may be inappropriate for part-time students since the vast majority are employed before taking their courses. Using one-off figures does not tell us about the extent of change and progression in individuals' careers.
- (ii) *One-off collection after leaving the course, asking about employment status since before taking the course:* allows for measures of progression, but relies upon respondents' recall and so may lack the authority required for use in policy making; may also not be trusted by staff in institutions.
- (iii) *Collection at time of registration and after leaving the course:* ask new students about employment status, former students about current status and employment history since beginning of course. Then use two data sets to produce population level differences and estimates of progression, etc.
- (iv) *Collection at time of registration and after leaving the course, using tracking to link records:* as above but link records to produce individual longitudinal data. This allows much more sophisticated and more reliable analysis, measures of progression and change, etc. but requires a high response rate to the first survey in order to provide a large enough sampling frame for the second.

The data produced by this survey bear out the general assumption that the vast majority of part-time students are employed before starting their courses. Part-time students have already developed careers before their studies, and so measuring only their employment status afterwards will provide information of only limited value. For older students, higher education does not provide an entry into the labour market as much as a means to repositioning oneself within it.

If the first option is set to one side, the three remaining have different strengths and weaknesses, and choice between them will be determined largely by the uses to which they

are put. While using one questionnaire and relying upon the recall of students for longitudinal data might be satisfactory in general research, it is doubtful whether such data would command enough authority amongst the broader constituencies for higher education as a measure of performance and a means to accountability. Information based on respondents' memory of their position alone is likely to attract accusations of 'bias' and 'subjectivity'. Regardless of whether such accusations are appropriate, it is likely that they would detract from the value of the information collection exercise.

The final two options require a choice between comparison between two populations and longitudinal data regarding individual students. The latter option is clearly likely to produce more robust data, and is open to a greater range of analysis. However, it would be likely to impose greater costs because of the necessity of obtaining a sufficiently high response rate to the first 'sweep' to make the second 'sweep' possible.

Nevertheless, in this case the costs imposed need not be too great and the advantages may be particularly compelling. Firstly, either making the first questionnaire an integrated part of the registration process and establishment of the HESA record or using the registration process to 'piggy-back' a separate data collection exercise would be likely to obtain a high response rate at a relatively low cost, since address records should be highly accurate and students motivated to respond to correspondence from their institution. Secondly, the benefits of the first 'sweep' would be not only as part of the longitudinal study but as a valuable source of data in its own right. Institutions would gain useful market intelligence on the composition of their intake which could be used not only in marketing and careers advice but in designing provision to suit the various customers.

The first general recommendation is that:

A tracking methodology be adopted, with a first questionnaire sent out as part of the registration process and a second questionnaire after leaving the course. Linking the records from the two surveys will allow a relatively reliable and authoritative measure of changes in employment situation during the course.

5.2 Timing and coverage

Amongst the most common criticisms of the First Destinations Survey of graduates from full-time courses encountered during this project was that its timing (six months after graduation) was too early and so presented an unrepresentative picture of the early career paths of graduates. This finding is endorsed by research in the field which has indicated a lengthening transition period between graduating and obtaining 'settled' employment for all students (Teichler, 1998). The question of when to survey former students consequently attracted some attention during discussion as part of the project.

There is no similar research on the career development of part-time students after their courses. However, there appear plausible reasons why part-time students in general might take longer to realise the benefits of their study: they are older and more likely to have family responsibilities, they are generally already in employment and so do not experience an immediate need to gain a job, and so on. Further, it seems possible that the differences between types of part-time students (for instance those on employer-supported schemes and those studying independently) may be reflected in similar differences in the time it takes for study to impact upon their careers – creating further possibilities for bias. The evidence from the follow-up interviews for this survey is that some students did make career changes as a result of their course, but not in time for the survey (the interviews took place 1-2 months later).

The pilot survey in the project followed the FDS model owing to concerns about the response rates that we could expect. However, the response rate obtained was similar to that which would be expected at a similar stage in the surveying of full-timers and, given that part-time students tend to be less geographically mobile than full-timers, we might expect to be able to gain similar response rates for surveys conducted at a greater time after graduation.

Whilst leaving a longer period between leaving higher education and surveying (say, eighteen months after leaving higher education) is likely to increase the accuracy of the picture of career development that emerges, it has an obvious downside in that it creates a longer ‘feedback loop’ between the provision of higher education and indicators of its results. Consequently any decision about timing involves a trade-off between accuracy and immediacy. Accepting the need for information that is useful as well as accurate, ***the second recommendation is that:***

Six months after graduation is too early to obtain an accurate picture of the impact of part-time study on employment; the exact timing of data collection should take account of the uses to which such data will be put as well as the arrangements which are in place for the collection of data from graduates of full-time courses.

It should be noted that whether or not the First Destinations collection remains at six months after graduation, substantial comparison between full- and part-time students will still be possible if the proposed ‘diary’ questionnaire format is adopted, or another format which enables respondents to provide information about their employment situation in the six months after graduation.

Coverage is another issue. First Destinations data are only collected on those who successfully complete their courses (i.e. leave with the qualification they aimed for). However,

this misses the significant numbers who leave part-way through their courses, and a greater proportion of part-time students leave early. However, students who leave without gaining their final qualification may still benefit from their studies in ways relevant to employment and so there seem no prima facie reasons for excluding them from the data collection. ***The third recommendation is that:***

The sampling frame for the second sweep should include 'early leavers' as well as those who have completed their studies.

5.3 Content of information to be collected

Detailed matters of questionnaire design have been dealt with in section 3 above. In general terms, it appears that the information collected from this survey addresses the needs of institutions and could fulfil several functions for the sector as a whole and for various parties outside higher education. A few specific recommendations on additional information that could be collected can be found in section 3; if these are taken into account, then it appears that the information collected in the pilot study would be a satisfactory basis for regular national data collection. ***The fourth recommendation is that:***

The questionnaires used for the survey collect information on employment status, type of work, income, career changes, purposes of study and further study as in the pilot, with amendments as suggested. This information should be combined with data from the student record to provide a broader range of social and biographical information.⁶

5.4 Computer scanning

The computer scanning technology used in this study proved to be generally successful, with the only hitches relating to the use of labels (which could be easily corrected) and the self-coding system. Developing self-coding may require more work, particularly to make the coding sheets more user-friendly. In the long term, the use of automated coding systems may offer a third option. The difficulties of scanning certainly seem to be outweighed by the tremendous benefits in terms of cost savings and staff time. ***Therefore the fifth recommendation is that:***

Computer scanning be used rather than manual data entry or coding for the two survey sweeps⁷.

⁶ Although if institutions decided to integrate the first sweep into their registration documentation, it might be necessary to abbreviate the questions to a minimum 'baseline' for the second sweep.

5.5 Major choices concerning data collection, sampling and response rates

In choosing between the various options available, a few major choices need to be made:

- (i) *Centralised vs. institution-based data collection.* The use of computer scanning technology allows potentially great gains through automation, and through possible economies of scale – but these will be maximised only if the process is more centralised than is currently the case. Centralisation also lessens the risk of placing greater burden on careers services, whose resources are already stretched almost to breaking point by the requirements of the FDS.
- (ii) *Census vs. sampling approaches.* The First Destinations Survey adopts a census approach to surveying, which was widely criticised by careers services as imposing an excessive cost for the benefits gained which, it is claimed, could equally be obtained from intelligent use of sampling techniques. Further, it is pointed out, sampling is used for much research for policy decisions (e.g. Labour Force Survey, British Crime Survey, etc.) A minority view favoured the census approach on the basis that it gives greater authority to the data and produces larger cell sizes and so potential for disaggregation. The latter is important for institutional use at basic unit/course level. It may also be important if performance indicators of employability are to be used for funding and accountability purposes.
- (iii) *Response rates sought.* A further question relates to the response rates that should be sought. Institutions administering the First Destinations Survey are currently encouraged to produce a minimum 80% response rate. Many of those involved in the project pointed to the workload that this required and again questioned whether it was justified by the benefits gained. Furthermore, the adoption of centralised processing of returned questionnaires could address concerns about possible opportunities for distortion of returns. The minority disputing this position again pointed to the need for the data to be authoritative, and questioned the possibilities for using the information collected unless it is 'beyond reproach'. However, it is questionable whether the current high demanded return rate leads to more or less distortion in the data; there is evidence that institutions use increasingly unreliable information (gained from third parties, from before graduation and so on) in attempts to get closer to the demanded number of respondents. There are ways of testing the representativeness of lower response rates which could lend the resultant data more rather than less authority. A high response rate is not the only (nor necessarily the best) measure of the quality of data collected.

⁷ If institutions did integrate the employment questions into their standard forms, some manual data entry might be necessary, depending on how institutions design their documentation.

5.6 Our preferred option

The balance that is struck between these various concerns will obviously be affected by the relative importance that is attached to the various needs for information, the perceived ability of different methods to achieve those ends, and the resources available. It will also be affected by decisions made about the future arrangements for the FDS, not known at the time of writing. Clearly there is benefit in achieving comparable treatment of full-time and part-time students but the circumstances of the latter should not be distorted simply to conform to those of the former.

From the evidence obtained in this project, the preferred minimum requirement⁸ for institutions is as follows:

- A questionnaire is sent out by institutions to *all* new students. This is introduced as a compulsory part of the registration process, either with an obligation on institutions to produce a certain response rate, or upon individuals to return the questionnaire in order to register for their courses. These questionnaires are returned (directly or via institutions) to a central processing body (presumably HESA) which is responsible for computer scanning the results, entering them on a database, and returning the datasets to the institutions involved. (Alternatively, questionnaires could be processed by institutions and returned as part of the Student Records returns).
- A second questionnaire is sent out by institutions to a *sample* of students in December of the second year after leaving their respective higher education institutions. This sample contains two elements and is selected by HESA according to agreed principles. *Firstly*, for each institution there is a general sample which is representative of the population of that institution as a whole (taking into account major variables of subject of study⁹, qualification obtained, ethnicity, age and gender – possibly with a degree of over-sampling to compensate for differential response rates). The size of this sample would be proportionate to the number of part-time students at the institution (an agreed proportion between 10% and 30% to be used for all institutions). This sample is designed to perform a general monitoring function and to allow year-on-year monitoring by the institution and, if required, by external bodies. The *second* element of the sample would be census surveys of particular subject areas. The subjects to be surveyed would be chosen on a rota basis to coincide with quality assurance procedures, i.e. QAA subject reviews. The subject-based sample would allow in-depth examination of particular subject areas

⁸ Institutions would of course retain the ability to collect more information if they so wished.

⁹ Subject of study is an important variable for two main reasons: firstly, because different subjects impact on careers in different ways – vocational subjects often having more short-term effect, for instance, with general subjects giving long-term benefits; and, secondly, because the subject mix of an institution often reflects the motivations of its students, which inevitably impacts on the relationship between study and career development. See the substantive project report for evidence and discussion on these issues.

institutionally and nationally and could be combined with the general figures to produce figures for change over time.

- Responsibility for ensuring the necessary level of returns would rest, as currently, with individual higher education institutions. Within the sample size provided, each institution would be responsible for ensuring that a target response rate is achieved (this level would be set more realistically than the FDS's 80%, for a more effective use of resources and to lessen the risks of unreliable data – possibly around 60%). Completed questionnaires would be returned to HESA, who would inform institutions of the outstanding questionnaires on a regular basis and take responsibility for computer scanning of the results, linking with the database and returning datasets (numerical and text-based information) to institutions within an agreed timescale.
- The resultant data would produce an authoritative picture on a national and institutional level of all subject areas on a cyclic basis to coincide with quality assurance work; it would also provide a reliable picture of general trends on an annual basis. The use of registration procedures for the first 'sweep' would both provide the basis for the second 'sweep' and provide important information in its own right at an institutional and national level. However, this approach would not replicate the already burdensome workload of the First Destinations Survey. The combination of centralised and institution-level work would also minimise the resource implications for individual institutions and take advantage of economies of scale whilst utilising the strengths of the current data collection methods. Retaining a required response rate is probably necessary to ensure the authority of the results, particularly against allegations of manipulation of returns by institutions; the use of centralisation of data collection provides a further safeguard for the data.
- This proposal combines many of the strengths of the various options set out above. It incorporates the economy and efficiency of more centralised collection with the ground-level knowledge and skills of the institutional staff. The use of sampling would dramatically reduce the workload relative to the FDS, while the rolling census by subject would produce detailed data to be used for sophisticated and robust analyses. Finally, by developing links between the subject-based periodic census and quality assurance procedures it would develop incentives for institutions seriously to consider employment issues whilst ensuring that the information is used in context as a basis for further consideration rather than a crude conclusion.
- Were our proposal to be adopted, a disadvantage would be that it would be at least six years before a full set of data on graduates from part-time courses would become available (due to the tracking methodology). Therefore, as an interim arrangement, we

recommend the introduction of annual sample surveys of graduates from part-time courses following the methodology used for the survey undertaken as part of this project.

5.7 Other options

- (i) An alternative option would be for HESA to mail out questionnaires directly to all new students and all 'leavers' at an agreed time after they had left the relevant higher education institution. Questionnaires, followed by one reminder card and a second questionnaire, would be expected to produce a response rate around 40%-50%. Although this would generally be considered an adequate sample for research purposes, it might impact on the authority of the data for policy and institutional purposes; further, options for tracking would be limited by the smaller size of the first 'sweep'. A disadvantage of this option for institutions is that it distances them from their students and graduates. It would save them time and costs but it would deprive them of a useful opportunity to contact their former students.

- (ii) Were a closer relation to the current First Destinations procedures to be preferred, or the use of a central processing body to be avoided, then it would be possible to replicate current collection procedures for part-timers, i.e. second sweep administered by institutions to the entire cohort and with a required response rate. However, this approach would have major weaknesses. The resource implications would be extensive (with economies of scale and from sampling lost) without providing much additional information. The data collected would not take into account the distinctive features and circumstances of part-time students. It is questionable how much impact on decision-making the data collected would have. This option is ***not recommended***.

5.8 Costs of the various options

It is difficult to provide a precise costing of the options. As with the FDS, estimates of staffing costs are difficult to obtain and almost certainly vary between institutions. What is clear is that costs rise significantly with the response rates that are sought and that sampling procedures can produce a substantial reduction of costs compared with the census approach of the FDS.

Appendix III provides costs of the survey undertaken as part of this project. Non-staffing costs (but including coding and computing) worked out at just under £2 per student/graduate surveyed. 30,000 students graduated from part-time degree and HND/DipHE courses at UK higher education institutions in 1997/8. To survey all of them would have cost £60,000 in direct non-staffing costs.

The relative costs of the three options referred to above are considered below. Taking the preferred option as a base and making comparisons with the current FDS arrangements, the following conclusions might be drawn.

For the *preferred option*, compared with the FDS, some additional costs would be incurred by collection of extra information at the point of student registration. These would be more than offset by savings gained through the adoption of a sampling methodology, by the use of self-coding and computer scanning, by the central processing of data by HESA, and by the adoption of lower target response rates. We are not able to quantify the savings compared with the FDS survey but they would be substantial if institutional samples of under 30% (as recommended) were used. Some institutional costs would be transferred to HESA.

The *second option* (a centralised survey) would not appear to offer significant savings in non-staffing costs although it would transfer costs from institutions to HESA and might be expected to produce significant economies of scale, especially concerning staffing costs. A rough estimate would be that the second option would cost around 0.8 of the costs of the first and preferred option if similar samples were taken. If a census was taken, it would be more expensive.

The *third option* is effectively the replication of the FDS and has been considered above. It should, however, also be noted that our preferred option would involve the collection of a considerable amount of additional information on individual students/graduates compared with that collected for the FDS. This additional information – vital, in our view, to reflect the circumstances of part-time students – carries only insignificant additional costs.

5.9 Uses of information

The proposed data collection method would provide valuable information at national, sectoral and institutional levels.

The general sample would provide year-on-year indicators that could contribute to policy discussions and assessment of the performance of the sector relative to the macroeconomic situation. The subject specific census, in conjunction with quality assurance subject reviews, would provide an invaluable basis for discussion of the current state of the many subjects taught in higher education. This information could be of great value to current and prospective students assessing their career options. It would also be of use to organisations such as TECs and RDAs who need information on the characteristics of the qualified workforce.

At the institutional level, the data would allow institutions to keep in touch with their performance on an annual basis, whilst supporting attention on particular subject areas in turn. By focusing on the system of subjects as a key element in the organisation of data

collection, the proposed system would link with the ways in which higher education organises itself, and encourage departments to compare their performance with their competitors and colleagues elsewhere. Further, the data could provide a starting point for developing stronger links with local employers on a departmental and an institutional level, for careers advice and for marketing courses and institutions (especially in areas where they have been traditionally weak, such as among small and medium-sized enterprises).

The possible adoption of employability performance indicators nationally requires comment. First, were such indicators to be adopted, we see no sound reason why part-time course provision should be excluded. Second, interpretation of such indicators for part-time students would need to take account of local and regional labour market characteristics. Third, such use of data would clearly 'raise the stakes' of the data collection exercise, increasing costs significantly in order to ensure the authority of the data for policy and funding purposes.

5.10 **Improving the employment relevance of higher education**

Employment data *can* make a contribution to enhancing the employment relevance of higher education. With regard to part-time students, it could be a valuable tool in helping universities to make the fullest contribution to developing the resources of skills and knowledge in their regions. The data can motivate and assist institutions to assess and reassess their own performance. They can help institutions to know their own students, past and present, better and to meet the needs of future generations of students more effectively.

The data collection proposed here seeks to integrate the collection and use of employment data with quality assurance procedures. This provides an important external scrutiny of employment performance in conjunction with a full range of quality criteria.

Public availability of employment data will both encourage accountability and assist student and employer choice. For these processes to be effective, the information provided needs to be accurate and fair. Consequently, it is recommended that:

- (i) a range of indicators are used since reliance on any one (income, employment status, managerial responsibilities, type of occupation) is likely to distort the picture.
- (ii) institutions' performance should be assessed by comparison with an adjusted sectoral average in order that access priorities are not compromised and the diversity and flexibility of the sector maintained. This average should take into account several factors: age, which obviously affects the relation between students' careers and their study; gender, since there are strong links between career patterns and gender; ethnicity, for the same reason; qualification aim, to ensure that like is being compared with like; and subject of study, since different subjects impact on careers over a

different time-span and since the composition of students in terms of career motivation varies between subjects¹⁰. For part-time students – less geographically mobile – the characteristics of the local and regional labour market should be taken into account.

- (iii) these data, in addition to public availability, could be used as a trigger for further scrutiny. If, for instance, an institution's performance appeared consistently below the adjusted sectoral average, this could be the basis for further investigation to discover whether underlying problems can be found. Equally, if an institution's performance were consistently above the adjusted sectoral average, then it could provide a source of examples of better practice for the rest of the sector.

¹⁰ The survey report details these patterns. Note especially the relation between subject of study and motivations for study. If a subject attracts a large number of students who are not primarily interested in advancing their careers, it is likely to achieve a lower overall performance in terms of career improvement than a subject which only attracts students interested in career improvement, **even if** the first subject provides greater career progression for those students who do seek career improvement.

6. BIBLIOGRAPHY

- M Binks and S Otter (1998): "Realizing the potential contribution of higher education institutions to their regions and communities", *Tertiary Education and Management* 4.3.
- T Becher (1989): *Academic Tribes and Territories*, Buckingham: Open University Press.
- C Boys, J Brennan, M Henkel, J Kirkland, M Kogan and P Youll (1988): *Higher Education and the Preparation for Work*, London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers.
- J Brennan and P McGeevor (1988): *Graduates at Work*, London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers.
- CNAA (1989): *Higher Education and the Preparation for Work*, London: Council for National Academic Awards.
- DfEE (1997) *Higher Education and Employment Development Programme: Prospectus 1997*, Sheffield: Department for Education and Employment.
- DfEE (1998): *Universities and Economic Development*, London: Department for Education and Employment.
- J Goddard (1999): "How Universities Can Thrive Locally in a Global Economy", in H Gray (ed) (1999): *Universities and the Creation of Wealth*, Buckingham: Open University Press.
- S Otter (nd): "Labour market information: its impact on planning",.
- QSC (1998): "Feasibility study of obtaining employment data on part-time students/graduates: proposal", unpublished.
- T Schuller, D Raffe, B Morgan-Klein and I Clark (1999): *Part-time Higher Education*, London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers.
- U Teichler (1998): *Higher Education and the World of Work: Changing Conditions and Challenges*, paper for the UNESCO World Conference on Higher Education, Paris.
- M Tight (1991): *Higher Education: a Part-time Perspective*, Buckingham: Open University Press.

Questionnaire for current students

1. The background to your course

Please tell us about what you were doing immediately before starting your course and what you are doing now. *Please tick **all** that apply.*

(i) At these times, were you:	Immediately before starting your course	Now
In full-time paid employment	▪	▪
In part-time paid employment	▪	▪
Doing voluntary work	▪	▪
Self-employed	▪	▪
Retired	▪	▪
In full-time study or training	▪	▪
In part-time study or training	▪	▪
Not working and looking for work	▪	▪
Not working and not looking for work	▪	▪

(ii) If you have been employed for some or all of your course, has your employer: *(Please tick **all** that apply)*

Paid more than 25% of your course fees? <input type="checkbox"/>	Allowed you time off to study? <input type="checkbox"/>
--	---

(iii) Which of the following does your course involve? *Please tick **all** that apply.*

Formal sessions in the evenings <input type="checkbox"/>	Formal sessions in the day <input type="checkbox"/>
Blocks of formal 'full-time' study <input type="checkbox"/>	Distance learning <input type="checkbox"/>

(iv) Which, if any, of these qualifications did your **parents** achieve? *Please tick **all** that apply.*

	Mother	Father
O-level, CSE, GCSE, School Certificate or equivalent	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
A-level or equivalent	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Above A-level but below degree	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
First degree or equivalent	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Higher degree	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
None of these	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Don't know	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

2. Your main or only work immediately before starting your course and now

If you were or are working (for someone else or for yourself, paid or voluntary) at either of these times, please tell us about your **main** or only **job** or **work** here.

If not, please continue to **question 4**

At these times, for your main or only job or work , what was/is your:	Immediately before starting your course	Now
Job title		
(i) Please give the full title (e.g. electrical engineer)	_____	_____
(ii) Please refer to enclosed sheet and <i>enter occupation code here</i> .	<input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/>
(iii) Did/do you have any other paid employment at these times?	Yes No	. .
Type of activity		
(iv) What is/was the main activity of your organisation at the location where you work/worked? (e.g. bicycle manufacturer)	_____	_____
(v) Please refer to enclosed sheet and <i>enter activity code here</i> .	<input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/>
Location		
(vi) Where was/is your work located? <i>Please enter the postcode here.</i>	<input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/>
Number employed		
(vii) Approximately how many people were/are there in your organisation (include everyone working for the organisation in the UK)?	1-10 11-50 51-200 201+
Number in charge of		
(viii) Approximately how many people <i>in total</i> did/do you manage or supervise (directly and indirectly)?	none 1-5 6-20 21 +

3. Your work overall immediately before starting your course and now

Here we are interested in **all the jobs and work** you have done and are doing at these two times (whether that includes one or several paid or unpaid jobs, working for yourself or for someone else).

Hours worked

(i) Approximately how many hours did/do you work per week (in total , including all the work you were/are doing)?	1-20 21-40 41-60 61+
---	---	------------------

Income

(ii) Approximately how much were/are you paid per year (pre-tax, in total)?	voluntary	.	.
	less than £10 000	.	.
	£10 001 - £15 000	.	.
	£15 001 - £20 000	.	.
	£20 001 - £25 000	.	.
	£25 001 - £30 000	.	.
	£30 001 - £40 000	.	.
	£40 001 - £50 000	.	.
	more than £50 000	.	.

4. Your course and your career

Have you experienced any career changes **since starting your course**? How important have your new qualifications been in these changes? *Please tick **all** that apply.*

	No, it hasn't happened	Yes, it has happened and participation in my course was:			
		Crucial	Helpful	Not important	Don't know
(i) Better pay	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
(ii) Promotion	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
(iii) More specialist job in same occupation	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
(iv) A new occupation	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
(v) Re-entered paid employment	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
(vi) Entered paid employment for first time	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
(vii) Became self-employed	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
(viii) Achieved management status	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
(ix) Moved to a new firm/organisation	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
(x) Other (<i>please specify below and tick the appropriate box</i>)	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

-------	--	--	--	--

(xi) In five years time, do you anticipate:

- Doing the same type of work at the same rank as present ▪
 - Doing the same type of work at a higher rank than at present ▪
 - Doing a different type of work or starting employment ▪
 - Being self-employed ▪
 - Not being employed ▪
 - Don't know ▪
 - Other (*please tick box **and** specify below*) ▪
-

(xii) Some people decide to take a particular course because they think it will help them with their career, others out of interest or other personal reasons. Which was **more** the case for you?

*Please tick **one** box on the **scale** below*

I took the course to help with my career	*****	I took the course out of interest/other personal reasons
---	-------	--

(xiii) If you thought the course would help with your career, did you have a particular occupation in mind **when you started the course**? *Please tick **one** box on the scale below*

I had a particular occupation in mind	*****	I had no particular occupation in mind
--	-------	---

(xiv) If you did have a particular occupation in mind, **what was it**? _____

(xv) What is its **code**?

Please see the enclosed sheet

--	--

Questionnaire for former students

1. The background to your course

Please tell us about what you were doing immediately before starting your course and what you are doing now. *Please tick **all** that apply.*

(i) At these times, were you:	Immediately before starting your course	Now
In full-time paid employment	▪	▪
In part-time paid employment	▪	▪
Doing voluntary work	▪	▪
Self-employed	▪	▪
Retired	▪	▪
In full-time study or training	▪	▪
In part-time study or training	▪	▪
Not working and looking for work	▪	▪
Not working and not looking for work	▪	▪

(ii) If you were employed for some or all of your course, did your employer: *(Please tick **all** that apply)*

Pay 25% or more of your course fees? Allow you time off to study?

(iii) Which of the following did your course involve? *Please tick **all** that apply.*

Formal sessions in the evenings Formal sessions in the day
 Blocks of formal 'full-time' study Distance learning

(iv) Which, if any, of these qualifications did your **parents** achieve? *Please tick **all** that apply.*

O-level, CSE, GCSE, School Certificate or equivalent A-level or equivalent Above A-level but below degree First degree or equivalent Higher degree None of these Don't know	Mother	Father
	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

2. Your main or only work immediately before starting your course and now

If you were or are working (for someone else or for yourself, paid or voluntary) at either of these times, please tell us about your **main** or only **job** or **work** here.

If not, please continue to **question 4**

At these times, for your **main** or only **job** or **work**, what was/is your:

Immediately before starting your course

Now

Job title

(i) Please give the full title
(e.g. electrical engineer)

(ii) Please refer to enclosed sheet and enter occupation code here.

(iii) Did/do you have any other paid employment at these times?

Yes

•

No

•

Type of activity

(iv) What is/was the main activity of your organisation at the location where you work/worked?
(e.g. bicycle manufacturer)

(v) Please refer to enclosed sheet and enter activity code here.

Location

(vi) Where was/is your work located?
Please enter the postcode here.

Number employed

(vii) Approximately how many people were/are there in your organisation (include everyone working for the organisation in the UK)?

1-10

,

11-50

,

51-200

,

201+

,

Number in charge of

(viii) Approximately how many people in total did/do you manage or supervise (directly and indirectly)?

none

,

1-5

,

6-20

,

21 +

,

3. Your work overall immediately before starting your course and now

Here we are interested in **all the jobs and work** you have done and are doing at these two times (whether that includes one or several paid or unpaid jobs, working for yourself or for someone else).

Hours worked

(i) Approximately how many hours did/do you work per week (in total, including all the work you were/are doing)?

1-20

,

21-40

,

41-60

,

61+

,

Income

(ii) Approximately how much were/are you paid per year (pre-tax, in total)?	voluntary	,	,
	less than £10 000	,	,
	£10 001 - £15 000	,	,
	£15 001 - £20 000	,	,
	£20 001 - £25 000	,	,
	£25 001 - £30 000	,	,
	£30 001 - £40 000	,	,
	£40 001 - £50 000	,	,
	more than £50 000	,	,

4. Your course and your career

Have you experienced any career changes **since starting your course**? How important have your new qualifications been in these changes? *Please tick **all** that apply.*

	No, it hasn't happened	Yes, it has happened and my new qualifications were:			
		Crucial	Helpful	Not important	Don't know
(i) Better pay	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
(ii) Promotion	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
(iii) More specialist job in same occupation	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
(iv) A new occupation	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
(v) Re-entered paid employment	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
(vi) Entered paid employment for first time	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
(vii) Became self-employed	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
(viii) Achieved management status	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
(ix) Moved to a new firm/organisation	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
(x) Other (<i>please specify below and tick the appropriate box</i>)	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
_____	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
_____	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

(xi) In five years time, do you anticipate:

- Doing the same type of work at the same rank as present
- Doing the same type of work at a higher rank than at present
- Doing a different type of work or starting employment
- Being self-employed
- Not being employed
- Don't know
- Other (please tick box **and** specify below)

(xii) Some people take a particular course because they think it will help them with their career, others out of interest or other personal reasons. Which was **more** the case for you?

Please tick **one** box on the **scale** below.

I took the course
to help with my career

.....

I took the course
out of interest/other
personal reasons

(xiii) If you thought the course would help with your career, did you have a particular occupation in mind **when you started the course**? Please tick **one** box on the **scale** below.

I had a particular
occupation in mind

.....

I had no particular
occupation in mind

(xiv) If you did have a particular
occupation in mind, **what was it**? _____

(xv) What is its **code**?

Please see the enclosed sheet

5. Further study or training

This section is about any further study or training you might be undertaking now. If you aren't studying or in training at the moment, then you don't need to fill in any of this section.

(i) Will you gain a qualification if you complete your study or training successfully?

Please tick **all** that apply.

- | | |
|---|---|
| No qualification <input type="checkbox"/> | Professional Qualification <input type="checkbox"/> |
| PGDip <input type="checkbox"/> | PGCE <input type="checkbox"/> |
| First Degree <input type="checkbox"/> | Masters Degree <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Doctorate <input type="checkbox"/> | Other <input type="checkbox"/> |

(ii) Approximately how many hours per week are you spending in formal study or training?

Please tick **one** box.

- | | |
|--------------------------------|--------------------------------|
| 1-8 <input type="checkbox"/> | 9-16 <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 17-30 <input type="checkbox"/> | 31-60 <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 61+ <input type="checkbox"/> | |

(iii) What is your primary motivation in this study or training? *Please tick **one** box.*

Improvement in the same occupation

▪

Changing occupation

▪

Interest, other personal reasons

▪

Other

▪

(please specify)

APPENDIX II: ASSESSMENT OF THE QUESTIONNAIRES

NB The questionnaires can be found in appendix 1.

Overall, the questionnaires appear to have worked well. There are a number of improvements (e.g. sequencing and wording of questions) that might be combined in any further use of the questionnaires. These and other issues are dealt with below.

Section 1

The first section of the questionnaire aimed to collect background information on respondents that, combined with the information available via the HESA Individual Student Record, can be used to assess the different situations of respondents with regard to labour market situation, social class, etc.

This section elicited a high level of response, with only the questions on highest level of qualification achieved by parents eliciting a noticeable but still low non-response rate (3.7% and 3.9% for mother's and father's respectively) and a higher proportion of "don't know" (10.1% and 11.6%).

Combined with information on age, ethnicity, gender, highest qualification on entry, etc. from the HESA student record these data provide a valuable source of information on mediating factors that may affect individuals' performances in the labour market.

If a tracking system were adopted, the "Just before your course" column would not be necessary, since the first sweep would provide the longitudinal information. However, a matrix which allowed respondents to detail changes of employment status since starting their course could provide a useful adjunct to the detailed information on employment situation just before the course and at the time of questioning.

It is recommended that this section be maintained. Employment status should be moved to a new section, asking for employment status since "just before starting the course".

Sections 2 and 3

The second and third sections sought to obtain information on the career development of respondents through their work or employment status just before starting their course and at the time of returning the questionnaire (half way through the course or after completing the course).

Response rates to particular questions were generally acceptable, although on the questions referring to postcodes (2.v), paid or voluntary status (2.viii) and other employment (2.ix) non-response ran to 12%, 7% and 9% respectively (excluding those who were not working). Of those who failed to provide a postcode, around half provided a town, allowing for standardised postcodes to be entered, and a small number had been working overseas and so the question was not relevant. 11% did not respond to the question on income; of these, around half were retired or not in paid employment.

The two column format, asking respondents about their situation “Just before starting your course” and “Now”, seems to have been followed by most respondents, although many whose situation had not changed left the second blank. The use of a longitudinal tracking system will provide information on changes over time through the use of two successive “sweeps”. Consequently, it will only be necessary to ask about present employment situation in the second questionnaire. However, this system gives no insight into how many jobs (or periods of unemployment, travel, etc.) the respondent has had in the intervening period. Asking respondents to detail their employment status since just before their course will provide important supporting information.

There were no questions on whether respondents were employed on permanent or temporary contracts and, in the latter case, for how long.

The use of self-coding sheets on questions 2.ii and 2.iv appears to have been problematic for some respondents. By comparing the self-coded responses with the job titles and organisation activities described in the relevant text fields, it is possible to estimate the accuracy of respondents' use of the coding sheet. On both questions approximately 15% of respondents failed to provide a code, or provided an incorrect code. However, no form of coding is going to be error free.

Regarding job title, some people seem to have been confused as to which category their job title should fall into. For instance, respondents giving the job title ‘quantity surveyor’ used five different classifications, even though the coding sheet stated that code 04 should be used.

Some respondents seem to have been further confused by the use of two coding schemes, one for occupation and one for organisation activity. Some seem to have answered questions regarding the latter with codes for the former, producing errors in the lower range of codes. The existence of entries containing invalid codes (above 22 for occupation, above 39 for organisation activity) suggests that scanning errors may also have contributed to the difficulties.

It is recommended that this section be modified as follows:

- (i) **That respondents be asked only about their present employment situation and main or only job at present.** The questions asked should include all those in sections 2 and 3 of the pilot questionnaires, with additional questions on length of contract and name of employer.
- (ii) **Self-coding may require attention.** Depending on how much importance is attached to the coded categories, a new system may be devised or self-coding abandoned altogether (although this would have extensive resource implications), with automated coding of open-ended responses a long-term possibility.

Section 4

The aim of the fourth section was to ascertain what career changes respondents had experienced since starting the course, and what contribution their participation in the course and/or new qualification has made to these changes. This serves to pick up subtle changes (e.g. in managerial responsibilities) that might not be obvious from responses to sections two and three; to show respondents' perceptions of particular changes (e.g. what they might see as moving into a different career might not be immediately apparent to the analyst); and to give a measure of how important respondents feel their course and/or qualification have been in developing their careers.

Response rates were very high here (e.g. non-response to 4.xi was 1.7%, to 4.xii was 1.1%). However, many respondents seem to have been confused by the column "No, it hasn't happened" in question 4.i to 4.x. Most respondents simply left the entire row blank if they had not experienced a particular change; some apparently misread "No, it hasn't happened" as "It has happened" and so marked that box *and* another in the same row to show that the change had happened, and how important their course and/or qualification had been.

It is recommended that this section is maintained, but that the column "No, it hasn't happened yet" is removed to simplify response and analysis.

The questions on motivations for study proved very useful in analysis. However, the part-time student population contains many women in the 25-40 age bracket, for whom family responsibilities often impact on career choices. Consequently, a further scale asking about the effect of such responsibilities is proposed:

It is recommended that a question asking "To what extent do responsibilities to care for family members or others restrict the work you can do?" and with a scale from "Responsibilities for caring for my family strongly limit the work I can do" to

“Responsibilities for caring for my family members and others do not limit the work I can do at all” be added to section 4 of the questionnaire.

Section 5

The fifth section was intended to provide information on further study undertaken by respondents since completing their course (only the questionnaire sent to former students contained this section).

Non-response was negligible for this section – of those who answered one question, more than 99% answered all of them. However, if the questionnaire were distributed (as proposed) approximately 18 months after completion of course, many respondents who had taken part in further study or training would have completed their courses, and so would not be included under the current format of this question.

Consequently, it is recommended that this section be expanded to cover any further study or training undertaken since completing the course in question (i.e. that which led to the respondent being sent the questionnaire in the first place). The current format could be adopted, but this would make it difficult for respondents who have undertaken more than one course of study. A possible alternative would be to ask respondents to tick the boxes that apply for *all* the qualifications that they have gained since completing their course, plus another box for courses of study without qualification. The current question regarding motivation for study could remain, with reference to the general drive of the studies that the respondent has undertaken since completing the course in question. The question on hours studied would probably have to be removed since variation between the different courses of study that the same respondent may have studied would make it difficult to answer meaningfully.

Computer scanning

The use of computer scanning facilitated rapid turn round in processing questionnaires and producing data at low cost. However, the process works much better on simple tick boxes than on numerical or text fields, where large numbers of errors necessitate significant correction work before analysis can begin.

APPENDIX III: COSTS OF THE SURVEY

Below is an outline of the direct (non-staffing) costs that were incurred in undertaking the questionnaire survey of the 6000 current and former students from the six participating universities.

Staff time contributions of the partner institutions in administering the survey were at the professional, administrative and clerical levels. This was not charged to the project and a record of the time used was not kept. However, a small contribution was made to each of the institutions from the overall project budget to support clerical costs.

Students/graduates were mailed twice. Initial mail-out consisted of a questionnaire, coding sheets, a reply-paid envelope and a covering letter. The second mail-out was a postcard reminder. The costs were as follows:

	£
Printing and design costs of questionnaires, coding sheets, postcard reminder and envelopes	1,665.00
Postage	3,270.00
Stationery	804.00
Coding and computing	6,251.00
TOTAL	11,990.00

Therefore, the non-staffing costs that were incurred in this survey were nearly £2.00 per student/graduate.

APPENDIX IV: EXPERIENCES OF THE PARTNER INSTITUTIONS

The execution of the pilot survey proved relatively unproblematic for the eight main 'players' involved (the six institutions, QSC and HESA). Below are brief reports from the partner universities on their experience of administering the survey and the ways in which the data might be used.

1 **Anglia Polytechnic University**

(prepared by David Davies, Strategic Information and Planning Unit)

The *identification of the required number of participants* in the survey was straightforward. We included postgraduate part-time students, as these comprise a large number of our part-time students population. The largest subject area of other part-time activity is in the nursing area and we attempted to ensure our response was distributed evenly across all our provision to ensure that the replies were not heavily weighted by responses from nurses (the nurse education sector is of course well-funded and a nurse has to be employed to attend professional updating courses and in most cases courses are funded by the employer).

Posting out the questionnaires was relatively trivial – we employed a student for two days to collate the material – including our letter – and labelling the forms and envelopes. As ever, however, all these activities seemed to vie with other priorities in the Unit and we were not the quickest off the blocks in getting the forms out. A knock-on effect of that delay was sending out the reminder postcards in what seemed an indecent hurry soon after sending the forms out, but it is pleasing to see that the response from APU students was not the lowest.

In addition, we received very few forms returned directly to the University where the addressee had moved – this does not prove that our address database is up to date as we do not know what happened to all the forms that were not returned but it is a good indicator.

At this stage it is perhaps too early to comment on detailed *use of the data* but we anticipate being able to use the information, even from this limited feasibility study, to inform debate in our Corporate management Group, our Recruitment Admissions and Retention Group, to schools via subject discipline teams, and marketing.

In addition, we would expect to feed this information into our regional deliberations via our Regional Office and RDA colleagues and to inform such bids as HEROBIC. Other staff in the University and throughout the regional university will be told of the research via an article in Bulletin, our internal newsletter.

We will also take up the opportunity to consult with colleagues in the eastern region of the Open University to compare the results of their output with ours.

Generally the research has points of interest for employability, learning outcomes, informing curriculum planning, labour market research, outcomes relating to internal guidance and support for students, and lifelong learning agendas.

One difficulty we may encounter in disseminating the research to date is tracking the use of the data throughout APU and the use to which it is put in supporting or informing the University strategic plan.

APU would support the use of an FDS style return for part-time students, so long as it was, as far as possible, integrated into the existing FDS activity. This would go a long way in addressing the anomalous situation the higher education sector finds itself in with regard to quality information about part-time students.

2 **Nottingham Trent University**

(prepared by Paul Hacking, Careers Advice and Employment Service)

The design of the questionnaire: Our initial thoughts upon seeing the form were that it was long and rather imposing. The inclusion of a self-coding sheet did not appear immediately user friendly, and we were concerned that people may be deterred from going any further with the form. We realise that, for the practicality of computer scanning, the form had to be structured in this way, and the response rate shows that people were not put off too much.

The practicalities of the process: Our first step was to write to the Deans of each faculty to inform them of the project and its aims and objectives. Contact was then made with faculty administrators in order to identify relevant part-time courses that would be considered of particular interest and/or ease to be included. (Course codes containing larger numbers of students were identified as a possible means of simplifying the administrative process.)

It soon became clear that the final selection of both current students and graduates would be made in consultation with the student records section of our Registry. As it seemed illogical to mailshot a cohort for whom contact information of sufficient quality was not available, various part-time courses were examined. We eventually selected courses for which complete home addresses were held for graduates, and complete term-time addresses were held for current students.

Relevant address and HUSID details for this cohort was sent to the Careers Service as an 'ACCESS' database, from where it was merged onto mailing labels for both the initial form and the follow-up postcard.

Deans, heads of department and course leaders have been informed that their sections were being included in the study throughout the process, and it has also been publicised in 'Grapevine', the University's staff magazine.

The whole process has taken more time than was originally anticipated. As students were brought in to stick the labels onto the forms, most of this time was taken up by the internal consultation process regarding the selection of courses (although this could be simplified if the project were to be repeated).

The ways that data were provided: The provision of data in an 'EXCEL' pivot table was acceptable for our institution, although more information would have been useful for analysis to take place. We imported the full data 'ACCESS' for this analysis, but needed the coding reference tables to make sense of the data on screen. These were provided on paper format, and some were available for downloading from the HESA web-site, but it would have been very useful to have received them in 'ACCESS', with their relationships to the main table of data already established for ease of use. The inclusion of HESA Student Identifier codes within the data would have been useful (obviously for our own institution only) so that data could be linked directly to specific courses, rather than generic study areas.

Quality control: We have noticed that a large number of the text entries in the database (such as occupation before and after study) contain very erratic spelling, which we assume are due to the nature of the computer scanning process. A great deal of time that would otherwise have been spent coding and manually inputting was obviously saved by the use of this scanning process, but we feel that this quality issue is worth pointing out.

Difficulties in using the information: In terms of how the information will be used in relation to institutional and departmental strategies it is too early to comment. I am sure it will be used to inform course planning but we will need more time to examine the results of the survey.

Ways information from the project could prove valuable: One of the most important ways information from the project will be made useful is as evidence as part of the subject review for Quality Audits. We are currently involved in preparing for a subject review in the area of 'allied to medicine' which includes a part-time degree course in health studies. This course was part of the survey for the project and provides qualitative evidence of how we are following up current students and graduates related to this course. This is particularly useful as there is a dearth of information available in this area relative to full-time courses.

The interim aims and findings of the project (aggregate information only) were also recently presented at a conference hosted by The Nottingham Trent University. This is the annual conference of the Forum for the Advancement of Continuing Education (FACE). The title of the conference was 'Lifelong Learning in Practice', and the information was presented in the context of how destination data can be used by curriculum planners and those involved with lifelong learning.

Possibilities for the future: This has not been fully assessed as yet. There are, however, inevitable resource implications if we were to repeat the follow up of part-time students in future years.

3 The Open University

(prepared by Alan Woodley, Institute of Educational Technology)

The Open University has a very long history of surveying its students and its graduates. The surveys are carried out by its own Survey Office based in the Student Research Centre of the Institute of Educational Technology.

Consequently there were no problems in drawing a stratified random sample as follows:

	<i>Region 6 East Anglia</i>	<i>Region 7 Yorkshire</i>
<i>Current students</i>	250	250
<i>Graduates</i>	250	250

The reasons for focusing on two regions were to support the use of data for decision-making at regional level through the University's regional structure as well as central faculty-based decision-making at Milton Keynes.

The first mailing consisted of a covering letter from the OU, a questionnaire and a reply-paid label addressed to HESA. The labels were printed with the student's name and address and HESA Student Identifier. One label was attached to the questionnaire and one to the envelope. A third label was retained for the reminder postcard. The reminder postcard was sent out to all in the sample approximately three weeks after the first mailing, regardless of whether they had responded.

Problems: Some of the graduate questionnaires were sent to current students and vice versa. This would be avoided in future by a) keeping the two jobs completely separate, b) using different colour questionnaires, and c) closer supervision.

Several phone calls were received from older OU students/graduates saying that the survey was not relevant to them because they had retired. In future the questionnaire should perhaps not look and sound so "job-related".

Some problems were created by the use of HESA Student Identifier, e.g. it is not easy to look up OU student records using this identifier.

On the whole, such surveys are unproblematic. The main questions concern who should be surveyed and when. For example, we might prefer to survey graduates two years after gaining their degrees.

As to the institutional use of the data, the Open University is in a somewhat different position to the other universities.

-
- (i) The Open University has collected this sort of data on a regular basis so it contains relatively little that is new. However, what it begins to do is to allow comparisons to be made with other universities.
 - (ii) The Open University is a national university. While it has 'local' and 'regional' employers, its curriculum is determined nationally. However, as the University moves towards shorter, more flexible courses, it should be possible to tailor courses to meet the needs of individual students and employers.
 - (iii) In the longer term, with much bigger samples, it would allow us to break down the OU graduate population by subject of study and by geographic region.
 - (iv) In the short term it will give us information to up-date our careers advice booklets that are sent out to students and graduates.

4 **Sheffield Hallam University**

(prepared by Patricia Quinn, Careers Service)

As one of the largest providers of part-time higher education in the UK, Sheffield Hallam University has welcomed the opportunity to participate in this feasibility study. Given the wealth of management information available regarding the full-time and sandwich final year cohorts on an annual basis, it has always felt anomalous that there has never been any comparable institutional overview of part-time students, let alone any national data. Discussions are still ongoing within Sheffield Hallam University as to how this idea may be progressed and a report on the findings and impact of the feasibility study will be considered at the next meeting of the Student Affairs Committee of the Governing Body. Here are some of the main observations and recommendations that they will be asked to consider.

The collection of data: Due to the non-sequential nature of some part-time study, it is not always possible to accurately define the 'final year' of a student's course. This would present problems if a national survey were to be undertaken along the same lines as the current full-time FDS. It is recommended that a more meaningful definition is sought to accurately reflect the student's relationship with study and their target qualification aim. In particular, any movement between full-time and part-time study needs to be captured.

On a practical level, within an institution of this size with a wide ranging and complex portfolio of programmes, it would be a considerable challenge to undertake a full annual destination return incorporating both full-time and part-time courses. It would undoubtedly require additional administrative resource.

The absence of postgraduate and professional part-time courses from the survey means that the whole exercise will be regarded as of only partial interest to this University which is a significant deliverer of such courses, particularly in part-time mode. This will no doubt impact on the way in which recommendations based on this study are received.

The imminent introduction of financial support for certain categories of those undertaking part-time study would seem to make this an auspicious time for higher education institutions to review the quality of the

information that they have on this group. Qualitative information on client aspirations and the impact of study should be of enormous value in this context, rendering this particular facet of the survey of particular interest.

The institutional use of the data: The Careers Service is currently involved in a couple of projects relating to the University's relationship with SMEs. The data from this project and from the employers of part-time students in general should be invaluable in progressing this work. The project has revealed that the data are currently captured in a haphazard way and not systematically captured and remains unexploited by and large, with little feedback requested on the appropriateness or effect of the course. The views of the other two main groups of part-time students, namely those in employment not sent by their employer and those who are unwaged, are largely unsought.

The careers team is about to commence an employability project looking at the way the University assists in the preparedness of its students for entry into the world of work and the skills to enable them to cope in the initial transition phase. The experience of part-time students as recorded as part of this survey will be incorporated as an important element of this study.

5 **The University of Westminster**

(prepared by Pat Pearce, Careers Service)

As always with surveys of this kind there is not enough time. At the University it was particularly unfortunate that a very similar survey (also funded by the DfEE) and managed by FOCUS Central London TEC was being mailed out very soon after our first mailing. We did a follow-up mailshot of course, but survey over-kill might have been one reason why the response rate was not as high as other institutions. Please note as far as the graduates part of the survey was concerned it was not very long after the final thrust of the First Destinations Survey.

Had there been more time to prepare, we should undoubtedly have asked course leaders to brief students on how important the survey was before handing out questionnaires. I am sure this would have raised the response rate for students at least.

One of the other difficulties encountered was trying to print the HESA Student Identifiers in the right spot on the label. I am not sure vis-à-vis the scanner that we were entirely successful. With hindsight I am sure we all now realise how specific instructions need to be in order for this to be one hundred per cent correct.

Blank questionnaires arrived on time, although initially we were not supplied with enough pre-paid envelopes. The money we were paid was useful income but in no way covered real costs: obviously the expensive part is *real* cost of staff time. It was also helpful for us to be provided with institutional and comparative data from HESA, and the report that they compiled for the seminar was extremely interesting.

All in all the survey was worthwhile, although as I said at a recent meeting, I do not think it necessary to repeat it each year. A sample of subjects on a rota basis should be more than enough.

6 The University of Wolverhampton

(prepared by Peter Smart, University Employment Services)

Introduction: The University of Wolverhampton was interested in the project because part-time study is an important part of the wider agenda of lifelong learning. More specifically, the University draws a high proportion of its full-time students from the West Midlands region and first destination figures for full-time students indicate that many seek employment in the region, contributing greatly to the local and regional economy. It is likely that part-time study has a similar impact but until now not enough has been known about the career aspirations and employment paths of part-time students. This is a national issue and is certainly not unique to the University of Wolverhampton. Higher education is still predicated on the needs of young, full-time students and careers services have seen themselves as mostly serving the needs of full-time students. A major reason for this is that destination figures (and performance indicators) have focused exclusively on full-time students and careers work with part-time students has been conducted on a largely ad hoc and limited basis.

Indeed a major consideration was how the part-time students themselves would receive the study. Careers activity at the University of Wolverhampton has had a mixed reception from part-time students. A minority have seen little relevance to their situation, echoing the often-stated response of academic staff that part-time students "all have jobs, anyway" whilst the majority have been pleasantly surprised that such facilities are available to them and appear keen to use the service. The actual usage of the service by part-time students has been disappointing, but hardly surprising in view of the rather rigid 9-5 opening hours.

Nine hundred and seventy-seven students were surveyed at the University of Wolverhampton, drawn mostly from the School of Engineering and the Built Environment and Wolverhampton Business School. 276 replies were received which represented a response rate of 28.2% compared to an overall response rate of 35.5%

The survey qua survey: From the point of view of the staff involved at the University of Wolverhampton, the survey was reasonably easy to administer. Printed forms and envelopes arrived promptly from QSC and were quickly dispatched to students. There was no difficulty in mailing out the follow-up postcards which served as reminders. Difficulties were experienced in arranging interviews with academic staff and employers, principally in terms of availability. Individual institutions perhaps under-estimated the workload which participation in the project involved and it is unfortunate that tasks which had deadlines for completion came at the busiest time of the year. The multi-faceted nature of the project, involving interviews with academic staff and employers as well as the postal survey added to the workload. Whilst this undoubtedly made the survey more insightful and the results more credible, it was at times onerous.

The major difficulty was experienced with the Registry at the University of Wolverhampton where staffing levels and workload meant that requests for assistance with the printing of labels etc were not always acted upon as quickly as would have been wished. At a very busy time of year staff were placed in the difficult position of having to prioritise work and resolve competing demands. This is not to be critical of Registry

staff who were unfailingly helpful, but it was often difficult to meet the requests of QSC in the timescale required.

A very big plus was the use of Optical Character Reading (OCR) in terms of data entry and this may hold lessons for the First Destinations Survey (FDS) of full-time graduates. Quite clearly students are used to filling out such items as module appraisal forms designed for OCR processing. Self-coding of occupational category may be more of an issue but the relatively problem-free use of OCR is encouraging.

Value of the Survey: The involvement of the University of Wolverhampton has been positive and worthwhile. It is clear that an annual survey of part-time students on the same basis as the First Destinations Survey of full-time students would have major resource implications. Whether the FDS itself is a productive use of resources is debatable, however, and the 80% target response required by HESA for FDS is clearly unnecessary as valid and valuable data can be achieved with a much lower response. Indeed the use of mailed questionnaires without telephone follow-up is an aid to consistency rather than a weakness of the part-time survey.

The feasibility study has been timely and is likely to prove to be valuable contribution to the study of part-time employment patterns.

7 Summary

The partner institutions involved in this project generally supported its aims and found its execution unproblematic. The methods and procedures adopted seem to have been generally successful. Two general main issues are raised by their responses:

- (i) *Computer scanning:* Some institutions experienced technical problems with the scanning technology, either in fixing identifier labels to the questionnaires correctly or in the quality of scanned text. However, considering that this was the first time that most of the institutions involved had used OCR technology the level of 'teething troubles' was remarkably low and both the concerns raised here can easily be resolved. The resource savings possible from the use of computer scanning are widely welcomed.
- (ii) *Pressure on resources and staff time:* This project obviously had to be combined with many other priorities for the institutions involved. In particular, careers services were involved in administering the HESA First Destinations Survey at a crucial point (around the time of mailing out) and this inevitably became a higher priority for them. Much of the work for this project was not directly involved in the survey: it was more associated with the other elements such as the interviews with university staff and employers, or the assessment of the data collection system, and so on. However, the concerns raised by staff about the resource implications of further collection merit serious consideration.
- (iii) The experiences of this project also point up important issues of the roles and responsibilities of careers services, registries and academic units. As concerns about employability issues become more widespread, institutional questions of 'who does what' and the consequential resource

implications within institutions will need to be reviewed. Relations between those responsible for the collection of data, for its analysis and interpretation, and for its use within the institution should be part of such review.

In addition, it is worth noting that in several institutions the results of this project will be feeding into ongoing development work on graduate employability.

APPENDIX V: MEMBERSHIP OF THE STEERING GROUP

Tim O'Shea, Birkbeck College (chair)

Peter Wright, the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education

Patricia Ambrose, Committee of Vice-chancellors and Principals

Martin Elms, Department for Education and Employment

Richard Swards, Higher Education Funding Council for England

George Taylor, Council for Industry and Higher Education

Brian Ramsden, Higher Education Statistics Agency

Catherine Benfield, Higher Education Statistics Agency

Anne-Marie Martin, Association of Graduate Careers Advisory Services

Robin Smith, Anglia Polytechnic University

Paul Hacking, The Nottingham Trent University

Geoff Peters, The Open University

Dianne Willcocks, Sheffield Hallam University

Len Shackleton, The University of Westminster

Gerald Bennett, The University of Wolverhampton

John Brennan, QSC Centre for Higher Education Research and Information

Tarla Shah, QSC Centre for Higher Education Research and Information

Alan Woodley, Institute for Educational Technology, The Open University

Jonathan Mills, QSC Centre for Higher Education Research and Information