

# HESA Consultation

A summary response from the British Academy

April 2019

## Background

The Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) launched a consultation to gather evidence on its plans for a new service offering and subscription model, due to apply from August 2019. These changes are being introduced as a result of HESA being appointed as the designated data body (DDB) for higher education in England.

The role of DDB means that a distinction has been made between statutory and non-statutory elements of the HESA service offering. As a user of HESA data and a subscriber to HESA's Heidi Plus data service, the British Academy will be directly affected by changes to the HESA service offering as well as being concerned about the effects on those working and studying in the disciplines for which the Academy represents and supports through its Fellowship and its funding, policy, and engagement activities.

The British Academy therefore wishes to express its view on the proposals from its perspective as the UK's national academy for the humanities and social sciences, and as a user of HESA data in this role.

## Response

As the UK's national academy for humanities and social sciences, the British Academy recognises the important role that the Higher Education Statistics Agency plays in the higher education sector, and it welcomes the opportunity provided by HESA to comment on the proposals for a new service offering and subscription model.

The British Academy believes that the UK higher education sector is a world leader in the collection and use of higher education data, and HESA has played a central role in getting the sector to this leading position. The collection, analysis and sharing of data as part of HESA's service offering has had major positive impact on the assurance and enhancement of quality in higher education and research, the delivery of evidence-informed higher education policy and regulation, ensuring public understanding and scrutiny of the sector, and informing student choice.

As with any major change to the provision of a well-used and well-functioning service, the proposal of a new service offering and subscription model poses risks as well as opportunities. The Academy believes that everything possible should be done to ensure that valuable data continues to be

collected and shared with stakeholders and that the quality and comprehensiveness of data is in no way diminished by the proposed changes.

To this aim, the Academy strongly favours the continued onwards sharing of non-statutory data in all six of the categories identified in the consultation. All categories of non-statutory onward uses of data are fundamentally important in ensuring the future health of the sector. HESA should strongly encourage providers to agree to onward sharing as the benefits far outweigh the costs or risks associated with them.

Even a small number of providers opting out of onward sharing in any of these categories would severely harm the value of higher education data. This would be counter-productive as it would create a strong disincentive for users of HESA data who are not HE providers to subscribe to Heidi Plus or bespoke data services from HESA, which in turn would put financial pressure on HESA and likely increase the subscription fees for providers.

The Academy's policy and engagement work relies heavily on access to HESA data. Without access to the current wide range of detailed data, particularly at the subject level, the Academy would be less effective in supporting the disciplines in the humanities and social sciences. For instance, the Academy uses HESA data to monitor trends in students and staff in different subjects and advise its Fellowship, learned societies and subject associations, and the wider sector of any subject-specific issues and developments. The Academy also reports to policymakers on the health and value of arts, humanities and social science subjects using HESA data sources such as the student and staff record, financial returns, and the DLHE / Graduate Outcomes survey, and requires sufficient granularity by principal subject area to do this effectively.

If the Academy was no longer able to gain data of sufficient granularity or accuracy on the disciplines it represents through HESA, it would have no option but to consider other avenues of obtaining the information, such as the use of Freedom of Information requests, which would increase the administrative burden on both the Academy and higher education providers. It is likely that other organisations would seek to do the same in this scenario, thus massively increasing inefficiency in data sharing and communication within the sector.

In addition to quality of data on students and staff in individual disciplines, the Academy is particularly concerned about the potential loss of vital data on non-academic staff in higher education providers. This is an essential source of information that is widely used, not only for providers to make informed decisions on strategic planning and recruitment, but in terms of transparency and accountability of the sector on such matters as staff diversity and employment conditions.

The Estates Management Record is also a very important and detailed resource that should be maintained across all nations of the UK. It is another key part of evidence-based institutional planning, and sector transparency and accountability of key issues of public interest from environmental impact and sustainability, to campus security and safety.

Beyond the existing data collection services under review in this consultation, the Academy would encourage HESA to consider how changes to their service will affect the collection of other key data sources on a UK sector-wide basis. For instance, the UK Forum for Responsible Research Metrics has recommended that HESA collect some of the key environment and impact indicator data for REF 2021 rather than leaving it to individual HEIs.

The British Academy urges HESA to take every possible step to maintain and enhance the quality and accessibility of UK-wide higher education data, particularly where data is widely used and valued, and where there are statutory requirements in some but not all UK nations.