



HIGHER EDUCATION STRATEGIC PLANNERS ASSOCIATION

# GRADUATE OUTCOMES: A GUIDE TO USING AND INTERPRETING THE DATA

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With support from HESA

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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The state of the graduate labour market has long piqued the nation's interest and never more so than now, in the midst of such unpredictable economic conditions.

The Graduate Outcomes survey is an important new source of information and, as the first set of results are released, this guide looks under the bonnet to support good understanding and use of the data.

Graduate Outcomes is the latest iteration of surveys tracking the various interpretations of success of those leaving UK higher education and replaces the Destinations of Leavers from Higher Education (DLHE) survey. It was designed to address criticisms of the DLHE, such as the timing of the main survey – only six months after course completion – and the potential for inconsistency in data collection and coding that was possible in the methodology.

The new survey model has a number of fundamental differences in approach. Graduates are surveyed 15 months after course completion, allowing longer to secure meaningful employment. It is centrally delivered, quality checked and coded. The survey now includes questions focusing on graduates' views on their activity, progress towards future goals and personal wellbeing, adding important context to the statistical information. It also gathers deeper insights into graduates' pursuit of a range of career paths, such as developing creative portfolios.

The richness of the data cannot easily be captured in headline statistics, but will serve a broad range of users including current and future students; staff and governors at universities and colleges; funding and regulatory bodies; and government departments. In all these contexts the following need to be considered:

- This is new information: Graduate Outcomes is different from the DLHE, so results cannot be compared to see whether graduates from a particular institution or subject area are achieving better outcomes than previously.
- Qualifications are important enabling factors, but not guarantees of success in the job market. Outcomes for individuals are shaped by multiple complex factors and the job they have at any point in time is the product of interactions between these.
- Some courses have clear professional employment pathways. Some providers run a large number of such courses, others do not. Using headline percentages to compare success rates between HE providers needs to account for such effects.

- Small numbers can have a big impact, particularly when turned into percentages. Where rates look particularly good (or bad) compared to other similar courses, it will be important to look at the actual numbers involved.
- Two years have passed since those who took part in the first Graduate Outcomes survey completed their courses. The employment market varies significantly over time – the impact of Covid-19 on the number and range of job vacancies available to those graduating in the summer of 2020 is a stark illustration of this.

**For students, applicants and their parents, teachers and advisors**, the most useful elements of these results are the information on the kinds of jobs that previous students have gone on to, and how well these match with their aspirations.

**Higher Education providers** will make extensive use of these results. Viewed alongside other evidence, these findings provide insights that can be applied beyond the obvious uses. They can inform work with local and national employers, shape initiatives with Local Enterprise Partnerships and inform lobbying of elected representatives and government. It is therefore important that Graduate Outcomes findings are understood widely across each provider, including by governors, senior leaders and managers.

**Policymakers, funders, and regulators** will use these results to inform strategic and policy decisions. Metrics are increasingly used in these contexts to identify areas of high and low performance and Graduate Outcomes data will be seen as an important indicator of the impact of higher education. Those seeking to use such metrics to drive rapid improvements need to remember the time-lags involved. If the results lead to the identification of new actions, it will take around three years before these start to show in survey results.

**Researchers and journalists**, particularly those who compile higher education league tables, will also have an interest in these results. Care should be taken to ensure that audiences are not misled, for example by emphasis placed on apparently large differences in percentage rates that are rooted in small numbers of respondents.

Graduate Outcomes provides the UK with a new and rich source of data on the graduate labour market that will grow and develop over time as further cohorts are surveyed and their experiences are added. Those wishing to make good use of the survey findings are urged to look beyond the headlines and engage with the data in an informed and considered way.

## 1. Introduction

Graduate Outcomes is the biggest UK annual social survey and aims to gather information about the status and career progression of graduates after completing their higher education course. It has been a hotly debated piece of work, on which several articles, reports and other publications have been written and digested, not only by the sector, but more widely by government, charities, journalists, researchers and others – all before any results have been published.

This guide has been produced by the Higher Education Strategic Planners Association (HESPA) with support from HESA (Higher Education Statistics Agency). It has been produced to coincide with the release of results from the first Graduate Outcomes survey and aims to help anyone looking to use and interpret the data to do so in an informed way.

HESA collects, assures and publishes information about UK higher education. Also the Designated Data Body for the English sector's regulator (the Office for Students), HESA works closely with UK higher education providers to ensure that the official statistics it produces are accurate and meaningful.

HESPA is the representative body for those working in strategy and planning roles in UK higher education. Responsible for collecting, quality assuring and returning data to HESA, and also for effective data analysis to inform strategic decision-making, strategic planners have a longstanding and constructive relationship with HESA.

The two organisations share a common interest in ensuring that HE data is well-understood and used appropriately and share the following motivations for producing this guide:

- **Ensuring the survey is understood**

This guide will deconstruct the Graduate Outcomes survey, its origin, context and uses, and offer an examination which, while not assuming too much prior knowledge or being highly technical, still acknowledges the survey's complexities. The aim is to enable deeper understanding of the survey's positioning and role in the world today, its various applications and interpretations by multiple users, and its overall impact on the sector and the views of applicants, employers and the public.

- **Informing on uses of the data**

Graduate Outcomes data will be used for a range of information and regulatory purposes.<sup>1</sup> Uses include those by higher education providers, funding and regulatory bodies, inclusion in official statistics, and research. The findings are used:

- to inform strategy and policy
- for monitoring purposes, for example through benchmarked metrics and performance indicators for employment outcomes
- to support prospective students in deciding whether, where and what to study
- to inform course development
- to underpin careers advice and information for graduates and current students.

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.hesa.ac.uk/files/Graduate-Outcomes-dissemination-policy-v1-20200529.pdf>, page 3

- Perhaps the most high-profile use of these data will be in university league tables, such as the *Complete University Guide*, and those produced by *The Times* and *Sunday Times* or *The Guardian*. All use destinations data in their measures of graduate prospects to give a view on how well leavers from these courses fare after graduation. It is important that these various uses of the survey data are understood and their effectiveness considered in each context.

- **Connecting the survey with reality**

As with many highly technical data-related exercises, the details of the process can dominate and sometimes - for those who are heavily involved - obscure the original objective. This guide aims to highlight the survey's intentions and acknowledge that, in the effort to improve information about graduate employment, this is a key source of information. Recognising the current unstable environment and the global impact of Covid-19, the survey will continue to evolve, as will the environment in which it is used.

Overall, this guide offers a comprehensive summary of the Graduate Outcomes survey, the background to its inception, how its findings will be used and by whom. It covers a fairly broad spectrum of information, which we hope to have captured concisely enough to be useful and enjoyable reading.

## 2. History and context

One of the main motivators for entering higher education is to enhance employment prospects or 'get a good job'. The UK has been conducting an annual graduate survey to gather data to enhance our understanding of graduate career outcomes since the 1960's.

In the 1990's, the First Destinations Supplement provided a single point survey of UK and EU domiciled leavers from full-time higher education courses.<sup>2</sup> 2002/03 saw the introduction of the Destination of Leavers from Higher Education survey (DLHE), which included leavers from part-time courses for the first time.

Reviews of the DLHE brought further changes: directly funded higher education students at further education colleges and students domiciled outside of the UK and EU were later included. The questions were also redesigned to enable leavers to report all the activities that they were undertaking on the census date and indicate which one they considered to be most important to them.

The DLHE survey was a two-stage process. The first was a census of individuals who had completed higher education courses in the UK. This was carried out approximately six months after the course ended and commonly referred to as the DLHE. The second stage was a follow-up survey roughly three and a half years after course completion, known as the Longitudinal DLHE.

The DLHE survey had a number of important strengths:

- It consistently achieved a very high response rate from full-time UK graduates (circa 80 per cent), ensuring all major leaver groups were adequately covered and providing a very rich dataset which could be linked back to records of the students' full activities

whilst in higher education, so supporting research and understanding of the whole student experience.

- It provided a snapshot soon after graduation, giving early feedback on how graduates were faring in the job market and enabling university career services to identify and offer timely support for those leavers who had not obtained the employment they were seeking.
- It created student employment – many providers employed students to conduct telephone surveying of their graduates.

But the DLHE received a significant amount of criticism:

- The early timing of the survey meant that data was collected before many graduates had obtained their first post-qualification career role.
- Responses to a number of the questions, such as salary, could not be externally validated.
- The data was collected by providers who individually interpreted the procedure prescribed by HESA and coded the data. An Official Statistics appraisal indicated that the survey did not meet the criteria for comprehensive assurance.
- The findings on employment levels, the proportion of leavers in highly skilled employment and salary levels were increasingly being used as primary outcome measures of the quality and success of providers, subjects, courses and even graduates themselves. This, considered in tandem with the lack of quality assurance measures surrounding the data, raised concerns for some as to whether it was really fit to be used for this purpose.
- The focus on measuring value and quality in terms of income and employment status meant that other important factors such as wider social value or graduate career satisfaction and wellbeing were not considered.

The Small Business, Employment and Enterprise Act 2015 enabled government to link higher education data with tax and benefits records to chart the transition of graduates into the workplace. The Longitudinal Education Outcomes (LEO) data show employment and earnings of higher education graduates at one, three, five and ten years after graduation, starting with the 2003/04 academic year.

Whilst this is an interesting dataset, the focus is entirely on employment rates and salary and does not address the wider context, nor graduates' perceptions of value. In addition, the activity of those who move abroad to work or study after graduating is not reflected in the employment or further study figures. This has potentially important implications given the numbers of non-UK domiciled students studying with UK higher education providers.

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<sup>2</sup> The First Destinations Supplement was run by HESA

### 3. Graduate Outcomes survey

Launched in 2018, the Graduate Outcomes survey aims to collect comprehensive information about the graduate labour market and the broad range of post-study outcomes, based on information collected from students (now graduates) fifteen months after they complete a programme of study.<sup>3</sup>

Graduate Outcomes replaced the annual DLHE survey which ended with the collection of information about the destinations of the 2016/17 graduating cohort.

The new survey model was developed to address concerns about the DLHE and to provide a richer set of contextual information for a broader view of graduate success. There are a number of fundamental differences in approach, including:

- Whilst DLHE mainly focused on the activities, location and salary of leavers, Graduate Outcomes also places emphasis on the graduate voice. This includes questions focusing on how meaningful or important graduates believe their activity to be; whether they are using the skills they gained from their qualification in their current activity; how they are progressing towards their future goals; and their views on their personal wellbeing. There is also more information collected from graduates who are self-employed or running their own business, with greater insight into the inter-relationships between self-employment and other activities.<sup>4</sup>
- Graduates are surveyed 15 months after course completion. After detailed consultation with the sector and other stakeholders, this timescale was chosen to give graduates a meaningful opportunity to progress in their post-graduation activities, while still being close enough to the point of completing studies that high response rates should be achievable.
- Graduate Outcomes is centrally delivered by HESA, rather than by HE providers themselves. HESA and its suppliers are responsible for contacting graduates, quality checking each response, completing any additional coding and collating the data.<sup>5</sup> This work also includes interpreting aspects of each response from the graduate to classify the type, industry and level of work being undertaken. Using the Standard Industrial Classification (SIC) of economic activities and a variant of the Standard Occupational Classification (SOC), this determines which graduates are deemed to be in highly skilled employment.<sup>6</sup>
- Graduate Outcomes is a mixed mode survey with responses split almost evenly across the online and telephone mode. A higher proportion of DLHE responses were obtained via the telephone survey which was previously overseen by each HE provider.

Graduate Outcomes results are being released in a range of formats including a Statistical Bulletin, open data with a range in-depth interactive tables and charts, plus accompanying data downloads, blogs and papers, and a new UK Performance Indicator for the HE sector.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.hesa.ac.uk/innovation/outcomes/about/principles>

<sup>4</sup> Full questionnaire: <https://www.hesa.ac.uk/innovation/outcomes/survey>

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.hesa.ac.uk/innovation/outcomes/about/our-suppliers>

<sup>6</sup> Standard Industrial Classification: <https://bit.ly/2Brm3fw> and Standard Occupational Classification: <https://bit.ly/36W9mop>

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.hesa.ac.uk/files/Graduate-Outcomes-dissemination-policy-v1-20200529.pdf>, pages 8-10

As HESA publishes the statistics for the first time, they are released as Official Statistics and also labelled as experimental.<sup>8</sup> As such, HESA releases these results with the aim of working with users and stakeholders in assessing the suitability and quality of the data. Users will be encouraged to exercise caution when drawing on these experimental statistics, evaluating the quality and coverage of the data to ensure that it is fit for their specific purpose.

Much of the debate around how, and even whether, the Graduate Outcomes results should be published has focused on response rates to the survey. The response rates achieved from the first cohorts have been lower than those from full-time UK students surveyed in the DLHE. Some reduction in responses was expected following the extension of the time since course completion and the increased likelihood that graduates may not have updated their contact details. Response rates provide important information about the breadth of the population covered by the results, but are not the sole indicator of data quality or reliability.<sup>9</sup>

### 4. Understanding and using the data

The results of the Graduate Outcomes survey are designed to be used in a number of ways:

- by current and future students to gain insight into the career destinations of those who have taken the same or similar courses before them and the potential opportunities their course might open up for them
- by universities and colleges – both staff and governors – to evaluate, improve and promote their courses
- by government, charities, journalists, researchers and others to understand the higher education sector and the state of the graduate labour market
- by funding and regulatory bodies and government departments across the four nations of the UK to assess the impact of public policy and shape future policy and interventions.

In all of these contexts, Graduate Outcomes is an important data source, but there are caveats that need to be borne in mind, and it would not be advisable to make decisions based solely on Graduate Outcomes results for any of these purposes – they are part of the picture, but not the whole.

#### General notes on the data: what they do tell us and what they don't

##### A. This is new information

As we have seen, Graduate Outcomes is different from the DLHE, so the results cannot be compared to see whether graduates from a particular institution or subject area are achieving better outcomes than previously.<sup>10</sup> As experimental statistics, they are still undergoing review to ensure rigour and quality, so there may be further changes to come.

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.hesa.ac.uk/blog/18-03-2020/true-method-knowledge-experiment-why-graduate-outcomes-statistics-are-experimental>

<sup>9</sup> <https://www.hesa.ac.uk/files/Graduate-Outcomes-dissemination-policy-v1-20200529.pdf>, pages 14-15

<sup>10</sup> <https://www.hesa.ac.uk/files/Graduate-Outcomes-dissemination-policy-v1-20200529.pdf>, pages 12-13

In future it will be possible to use this information to make more detailed judgements about performance over time, but for now all that is possible is to compare results with other providers – see points C and D below for more on this.

The new Graduate Voice questions give important context to the statistical information, which was felt to be missing from the DLHE data. They provide a sense of what graduates were aiming for when they took up studies and how they feel about what they are doing now.

## B. It is a survey

These data are gathered through a survey and there are a number of known shortcomings of survey data. Despite extensive cognitive testing, respondents may misinterpret questions, perhaps because they are in a hurry or because they have expectations about what *might* be asked. Some respondents may not answer fully, but share only what they are happy for other people to know, especially if they feel that a more accurate answer might show them in a less favourable light. HESA is aware of these shortcomings and has worked hard to reduce their likelihood or impact, but they cannot be completely removed.<sup>11</sup>

## C. Quantifying cause and effect

In the multi-cultural, diverse and unequal society that is the UK today, outcomes for individuals are shaped by multiple complex factors and the job that they have at any point in time is the product of interactions between these. Qualifications are important enabling factors, but they are not guarantees of success in the job market. The range of jobs available and the salaries attached to them are very location-specific, so if graduates are unable to relocate or travel long distances for work – perhaps because of caring responsibilities – they may be forced to accept work that is at a more junior level while they wait for a more senior role to become available.<sup>12</sup> We must be alert to simplified narratives around graduate outcomes that assume a linear progression through career paths. This is not always the case for graduates, particularly those who face disadvantage.

Other things that impact on the likelihood of gaining graduate-level employment include ethnicity, sex, disability and subject of study.<sup>13</sup> Some courses are very vocational in nature, such as nursing, teacher training or medicine and the majority of graduates from these courses go into a closely related professional pathway. Some providers run a large number of such courses which can raise their overall average figures and mask significantly poorer outcomes in other subject areas. This means that using headline percentages to compare success rates between HE providers is not advisable without accounting for such effects.

The timing of the Graduate Outcomes survey also means that it is difficult to be certain whether the course that prompted a graduate to be included in the survey was the one that enabled them to get the job they now have. The 15-month delay means they may have undertaken further study in between and it might have been the additional qualification that was necessary. Of course, the initial course might have been a prerequisite for the further study, and therefore an essential steppingstone, but this distinction is important.

<sup>11</sup> Methodology statement part two: <https://www.hesa.ac.uk/data-and-analysis/graduates/methodology>

<sup>12</sup> <https://www.ons.gov.uk/employmentandlabourmarket/peopleinwork/employmentandemployeetypes/bulletins/regionalabourmarket/january2020>

<sup>13</sup> <https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/graduate-labour-markets>

## D. Small numbers can have a big impact

Some courses admit small numbers of students each year, which means that results at subject-level can be misleading. For example, in a particular cohort, there may be more than the average proportion of graduates with family connections who helped them to get into the career of their choice, or there may be fewer who were geographically mobile and able to relocate to take up the best opportunities. When small numbers are turned into percentages, they can have a big effect, so where percentages look particularly good (or bad) compared to other similar courses, it will be important to look at the actual numbers involved, where possible.

Small numbers also create a greater likelihood of issues with individuals' privacy, so HESA applies a rounding methodology.<sup>14</sup> There are three aspects to the rounding methodology:

- Counts of people are rounded to the nearest multiple of 5.
- Percentages (like % of students who are disabled) are not published if they are part of a small group of people (fewer than 22.5).
- Averages (like average salary) are not published if they are averages of a group of seven or fewer people.

These rules are applied after any calculations (such as sums, averages or percentages) have been made so that changes to the data do not compound each other to give even more inaccurate results. This sometimes means numbers in tables do not appear to add up.

## E. Past performance

These findings show only what has happened in the past, and two years have passed since those who took part in the first Graduate Outcomes survey completed their courses. As the old adage goes, past performance is no guarantee of future success and the employment market varies significantly over time. The impact of Covid-19 on the number and range of job vacancies available to those graduating in the summer of 2020 is a stark illustration of this. Being able to remember the prevailing economic conditions that might affect any given course at some previous point in time presents its own challenges.

## F. Coding

As noted, all the jobs that respondents report through Graduate Outcomes are coded against the Standard Occupational Classification (SOC). This allows analysts to identify whether a respondent is in graduate-level employment or not. SOC codes are updated every ten years to reflect economic and social changes, so trends in employer requirements and recruitment patterns can take some time to feed through. Occupations that are now regarded as professions, and for which a degree is seen as an essential prerequisite, have not always been so – for example nursing only became a graduate profession in 2013.<sup>15</sup> This means that graduates from some courses may have gained employment within their targeted occupation, but still have this classified as below graduate level.<sup>16</sup>

<sup>14</sup> <https://www.hesa.ac.uk/about/regulation/data-protection/rounding-and-suppression-anonymise-statistics>

<sup>15</sup> [http://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/+/http://www.dh.gov.uk/en/MediaCentre/Pressreleasesarchive/DH\\_108359](http://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/+/http://www.dh.gov.uk/en/MediaCentre/Pressreleasesarchive/DH_108359)

<sup>16</sup> <https://www.hepi.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2018/01/HEPI-A-Guide-to-UK-League-Tables-in-Higher-Education-Report-101-EMBARGOED-4-JAN-2018.pdf>



## G. Contextualising the data in extenuating circumstances (Covid-19)

Whilst this publication makes no attempt to predict the impact on the graduate labour market in the years to come as a result of the global Covid-19 pandemic, it is worth considering any knock-on effect it may have on the survey model, the approach to fieldwork and the validity of the data collected. There have been calls from across the sector to question whether it is appropriate for surveys such as Graduate Outcomes to continue as planned. However, a key factor in continuing is that it is important to collect information that helps us to understand the longer-term impact of such events, and to maintain the time series of this new data source.

HESA is responsible for ensuring that the survey model remains credible during such unprecedented events (see guidance published in May 2020 in respect of Covid-19).<sup>17</sup> The guidance outlines, for example, how furloughed employees should be categorised and refers to updated instructions provided to telephone interviewers on sensitively supporting key workers and those affected by the pandemic when conducting the survey. HESA also has an obligation to make available the results of such surveys as part of its commitment to open data. However, there is an onus on third party users of the data to use and contextualise the data responsibly. This is particularly important in the context of regulation, reputation and rankings.

### Using the data

This is important new information and students, higher education providers, policy makers, regulators and others should take time to understand it and how it fits alongside the other information they have on the outcomes of higher education.

- **Students, applicants and their parents, teachers and advisors**

Students cite gaining 'a job I'm passionate about' as one of most important things they would like to achieve in life.<sup>18</sup> Seeing how others who are ahead on the path you plan to follow can help give you an idea of whether that path is the right one for you. The most useful elements of these results for students and applicants are the information on the kinds of jobs that previous students have gone on to, and how well these match with their expectations. Remember, there are no guarantees, but if others have used the qualification you are aiming for to progress in your chosen field, then at the very least you know it is possible.

Of course you should look at the statistics too, but remember the caveats above. The results for the subject or course you are interested in will be most relevant. Look at how these compare to the outcomes for the same subject or course at other providers. Small differences can be disregarded, but if the numbers in graduate employment or further study are significantly lower than other providers, you should ask the course team why this is. If their answer is plausible, and everything else about the course looks good for you, these figures should not be the reason for rejecting it.

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<sup>17</sup> <https://www.hesa.ac.uk/news/coronavirus>

<sup>18</sup> <http://www.unite-group.co.uk/campaign/new-realists-report>

If the course you are aiming for is new or accepts small numbers each year, there may not be figures available at that level. In time, this can be addressed by aggregating data over multiple years, but as this is the first year of results for this survey, this is not yet possible. If the course is accredited by a professional body, such as the Royal Society of Chemistry or the British Association of Art Therapists, you can be confident that it covers all the essential content for a career path in that area. If not, ask the course team what students who have taken the course previously have gone on to do, or what they intend the course to equip graduates to do. If you are concerned, talk to a careers advisor.

If you are uncertain about which subject to study, rather than looking at results for a specific HE provider, exploring the overall results might be most useful. Working backwards from the types of jobs that graduates move into might help you identify the subject (or subjects) that more commonly feed into career areas you are interested in.

- **Higher education providers**

Higher education providers should make extensive use of these results, both at whole institution-level and at subject-level. It is sensible to be cautious about placing too much weight on a single year of data, but viewed alongside the LEO data and evidence gained internally by careers services and alumni groups, these findings can improve understanding of the choices and opportunities your graduates have had since graduation. They shed light on how the skills, knowledge and understanding gained during their studies have helped – or not. Staff can use such insights to help promote courses to new applicants, shape changes to course content or make enhancements to careers services. They can also inform work with local and national employers and shape initiatives with Local Enterprise Partnerships (or equivalent). Both staff and governors can draw on these findings to inform their lobbying of elected representatives and government. This is a prominent dataset, which will be used extensively in public discourse about UK higher education. Later this year, HESA will develop a new performance indicator for the sector based on this data, and an understanding of the broader information underlying the metric will greatly enhance the ability of governors and senior managers to respond appropriately. For these reasons, it is important that Graduate Outcomes findings are understood widely across each provider, including by governors, senior leaders and managers, course teams, careers teams, researchers, innovation teams, marketing and PR teams and planning teams.

- **Policymakers, funders, regulators**

Graduate Outcomes data will be used by a wide range of public bodies to understand the outcomes from higher education and inform decisions about funding, regulation and policy. These bodies include the Office for Students, the Higher Education Funding Council for Wales, the Scottish Funding Council, the Department for the Economy (Northern Ireland), the Department for Education and Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, UK Research and Innovation, the Education and Skills Funding Agency and National Health Service bodies. Metrics are increasingly used in these contexts to identify areas of high and low performance and Graduate Outcomes survey data will be seen as an important indicator of the positive impact of higher education.

But it will be important for funders, regulators and policymakers to look beyond the headline figures and utilise the full findings of the survey in their assessments of value, success and benefit.

In the context of increased emphasis on data driven regulation, the urge to create new performance metrics from these data will be strong. But those seeking to use such metrics to drive rapid improvements need to remember the time-lags involved. Two years have passed since those who responded to this first survey (the 2017/18 collection) graduated. For providers and others to respond fully takes time, so if the results of the survey lead to the identification of new actions, it will take around three years (four years in Scotland) before the impact of these actions start to show in survey results. Even at this point only actions that affect those in their final year will impact; actions earlier in the student journey will feed through in later years.

- **Researchers and journalists**

The results will also be of interest to researchers and journalists, particularly those who compile higher education league tables. Care should be taken to ensure that audiences are not misled, for example by emphasis placed on apparently large differences in percentage rates that are rooted in small numbers of respondents, or by inferences about the performance of individual providers drawn from response rates to the survey.

## 5. Conclusions

Graduate Outcomes provides the UK with a new and rich source of data on the graduate labour market that will grow and develop over time as further cohorts are surveyed and their experiences are added.

Although focusing on the same subject-matter, Graduate Outcomes is different by design from its predecessor survey, the DLHE, which means that it cannot be used to continue the time-series and comparisons between the results of the two surveys are not appropriate. It is also different from the LEO dataset, which provides complementary insights into graduates' employment outcomes.

The primary purpose of Graduate Outcomes is to provide insights into the graduate labour market including graduates' experiences and their reflections on their situation. Whilst the data collected will inevitably be used in higher education metrics, those wishing to make good use of the survey findings are urged to look beyond the headlines. Whilst Graduate Outcomes provides important insights into the value of higher education, its use to assess the performance of individual HE providers or departments requires significant care to ensure that the influence of other factors – such as the circumstances of the students concerned and the subject mix – is accounted for.

The timeframe involved is also significant. It is now two years since the first cohorts to participate in the survey completed their courses. At least three, and more commonly five years have passed since these graduates started these studies. Covid-19 has served as a timely reminder of the fact that what happened in the past may not be repeated in the future. So new students should take care not to treat these figures as guarantees that undertaking a specific course will lead to the employment outcomes they seek. Leaders and

policymakers should take care not to expect rapid improvements in future results.

In all contexts, those wishing to make good use of the Graduate Outcomes findings are urged to look beyond the headlines and engage with the data in an informed and considered way.

### Sources of further advice:

National Careers Service: <https://nationalcareers.service.gov.uk/>

UCAS: <https://www.ucas.com/careers-advice>

Prospects: <https://www.prospects.ac.uk/careers-advice>

### About the authors

**Sally Turnbull** is a member of the HESPA Executive Committee, Chair of HESPA's Higher Education Data Insight Group and Interim Strategic Planning Director at the University of Hull. Sally has a strong interest in the ways in which data on higher education are used to inform the public narrative about the sector, having spent 14 years leading the planning function at the University of Central Lancashire covering a broad range of planning activities, including policy and data analysis, business intelligence, data returns, performance metrics, assurance and market research.

**Anita Jackson** is a member of the HESPA Executive Committee and Director of Strategic Planning and Performance at the University of Kent. Anita has over twenty years' experience of working in higher education, coordinating strategic planning, establishing risk management frameworks, developing business analytics, advising on policy change and managing projects in a range of providers including research intensive, small and specialist and modern metropolitan universities.

**Laura Knox** is a member of the HESPA Executive Committee and Director of Planning at the University of St Andrews. She oversees the delivery of the Planning function including analytical services; timetabling; and institutional risk, resilience and insurance services. Laura joined the University in 2008 after holding a number of research, analytical and planning support roles within the public and HE sectors.

**Jennifer Summerton** is HESPA's Executive Director. She joined the association in 2014 as its first official staff member and has overseen the development of its member services, including diverse provision for professional development, informing and strengthening evidence-based higher education policy, and ensuring effective, cohesive and well-performing member institutions.





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