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Mistry, V (2018) Sector reports review: September 2017 to January 2018. Innovations in Practice, 12 (1). pp. 34-53. ISSN 1757-921X

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Sector reports review: September 2017 to January 2018

Virendra Mistry

Teaching and Learning Academy, Liverpool John Moores University, Exchange Station, Tithebarn Street, Liverpool L2 2QP, UK

Contact: v.mistry@ljmu.ac.uk

Abstract

This paper provides a summary of selected reports and papers ('grey literature') published by key HE sector organisations and 'think tanks' between September 2017 and January 2018. These include: Association of Graduate Careers Advisory Services (AGCAS); Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy; Department for Education (DfE); Equality Challenge Unit (ECU); Gambling Commission; Higher Education Academy (HEA); Higher Education Careers Service Unit (HECSU); Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE); Higher Education Policy Institute (HEPI); Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA); Institute for Public Policy Research (IPPR); National Audit Office (NAO); Oxford Economics; Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA); Social Market Foundation; Society of College, National and University Libraries (SCONUL); The Sutton Trust; Universities and Colleges Admissions Service (UCAS); UK Council for International Student Affairs (UKCISA); Universities UK (UUK); and Universities UK International (UUKi).

The themes covered in this paper include: the HE market; HE participation and enrolments; admissions and supporting transition; student outcomes after the first year; teaching excellence; student engagement; postgraduate experiences; peer review of teaching; assessment; peer learning and mentoring; academic integrity; degree algorithms; student transfer; mental health; supporting disabled students; supporting progress; ethnicity, equality and diversity; care leavers; transgender experiences; sexual harassment; impact of gambling; student fees; enterprise and entrepreneurship; employability; work-based learning; university-business partnerships; intentions after graduation; graduate retention; graduate wellbeing; Brexit; internationalisation; challenges in HE; arts education; university-schools partnerships; HE workforce; academic libraries; and alternate providers of higher education.



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The HE market

The NAO (December 2017), in a report entitled *The Higher Education Market*, noted that only 32 per cent of HE students considered their course to offer value for money (VFM), whilst competition between providers to drive improvements on price and quality had yet to prove effective. The report underlined the limited level of consumer protection than other products such as financial services, though acknowledging that information available to help prospective students choose their course and provider had improved. The NAO posited that there was no meaningful price competition in the sector; that market incentives for HE providers (HEPs) to compete for students on course quality was weak. The relationship between course quality and providers' fee income was also weak (a provider moving up five places in a league table gained just 0.25 per cent of additional fee income). Overall, it was surmised that students could do little to influence quality once on a course, or unable to drive quality through switching providers. In response, and following publication of the report, UUK (December 2017a) provided a written submission to the House of Commons Education Select Committee inquiry into VFM in HE.

Student data

HEFCE (September 2017) released a statistical overview of the sector:

- The number of full-time UK and other EU undergraduate (UG) entrants to English HEPs in 2016/17 was estimated at 408,000 (an increase of one percentage point on the previous year). However, the number of entrants to part-time UG courses fell for a seventh successive year. The decline was sharpest for older students and those studying at low intensity.
- The number of UK and other EU entrants to PGT (taught postgraduate) courses rose considerably (by 22 per cent). This was attributed to the introduction of an income-contingent repayment postgraduate (PG) loan scheme.

- In 2016/17, approximately three-quarters of all entrants to full-time first degrees enrolled on Arts, Humanities or Social Science subjects. The number of entrants grew by 4.3 per cent in 2015/16 compared with the previous year, a bigger increase than that for Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM) subjects, which grew by 3.2 per cent. Business, Management and Administrative Studies was the most popular subject area for taught courses at PG level; almost half of postgraduate research (PGR) students were in STEM subjects.

In data released by the DfE (November 2017), in relation to full-time students studying HE from 2011/12 to 2015/16, there had been an increase in participation on first degrees of 6.6 per cent. However, over the same period, there had been a decrease of 1.5 per cent in participation on PG degrees. Also noticeable was a sharp decline in participation in part-time HE study, particularly for UG courses; from 2011/12 to 2015/16, participation in part-time study fell for all subjects except Engineering.

The most popular subject for full-time HE study in the UK in 2015/16 was Business and Administrative Studies. Overall, the most popular subjects for both full-time and part-time students remained the same from 2011/12 to 2015/16. It was also noted that 82.3 per cent of full-time students in Engineering and Technology, and 77.3 per cent in Mathematical and Computing Sciences, were male. Whereas 79.8 per cent of full-time participants in Education, and 79.2 per cent in Subjects Allied to Medicine were female.

HE participation

The HEIPR (Higher Educational Initial Participation Rate) is an estimate of the likelihood of a young person participating in HE by the age of 30; the DfE's (September 2017) analysis revealed:

- The provisional HEIPR for 2015/16 was 49 per cent, an increase of 1.4 percentage points from the previous academic year and, apart from a fluctuation in 2011/12 and 2012/13

that coincided with the introduction of higher tuition fees, a steady rise in the HEIPR was evident from 2006/07.

- Females were likelier to attend university. Whilst the HEIPR for both males and females increased, the gender gap in 2015/16 widened and estimated to be 11.9 percentage points; up from 10.2 percentage points.
- Individuals were more likely to participate in HE for the first time at age 18 than at any other age. The 2015/16 HEIPR for 18-year-olds had reached its highest point since the start of the series in 2006/07.

HEFCE's Participation of Local Areas (POLAR) classification is a measure of educational disadvantage based on young participation rates in HE, and estimates how likely young people are to go into HE according to where they live. It assigns local areas into quintiles. Quintile 1 areas have the lowest rates of participation compared to quintile 5 areas, which have the highest rates. HEFCE (October 2017d) released details of its latest release, POLAR4 with an explanation of the methodology and differences with the classification it superseded, POLAR3.

Admissions and supporting transition

UCAS's (December 2017) *End of Cycle Report* is a national overview of demand for and acceptances to UK HE. It provides analysis and insight into who is applying and getting in to HE, the changing patterns of recruitment and the impacts of qualification, market reforms and widening participation and access activities, and noted:

- Despite 18-year-olds from all backgrounds being more likely to enter HE in 2017 than ever before, applying UCAS's 'multiple equality measure' (MEM), little progress had been made in narrowing the gap between the most and least likely to enter HE since 2014. Similar patterns were evident for several of the single equality dimensions that comprise the MEM. For instance, the gap in participation between state school pupils from richer and poorer households (measured through receipt of free school meals [FSM]) remained unchanged from

2016, with those who do not claim FSM twice as likely to enter HE compared to those who claim FSM. However, the gap between those living in the most and least disadvantaged POLAR3 areas, narrowed slightly. In 2017, 18-year-olds from the most advantaged MEM group were nearly ten times more likely to be accepted to one of the higher tariff providers than 18-year-olds from the most disadvantaged MEM group.

- Data showed that the offer rates to applicants aged 21 to 25 increased by the largest amount on record, as did the offer rate to those aged 26 and over.
- 2017 witnessed the first year of students being accepted to HE with a mixture of reformed and non-reformed A-level subjects.
- There were notable increases in acceptances to Architecture, Building and Planning, Law, and Social Studies. Longer-term declines were evident in combination subjects and European and non-European language subjects, with far fewer acceptances seen in 2017 than 2008.

Contextualised admissions, where the social background of a university applicant is taken into account in the application process, leading to a reduced grade offer or other forms of priority, was the focus of Boliver et al.'s (October 2017) study for The Sutton Trust. Examining information made available via university websites during 2016/17 by a group of the UK's most selective universities (the Sutton Trust [ST] 30), the study found that, "While the university access gap between disadvantaged students and their more advantaged peers [had] narrowed in recent years, the gap at the most selective universities remains stubbornly wide" (p. 36). Overall, while the majority of ST30 universities reported that they used contextual data to inform their admissions process, in practice, the way in which they did so and the extent to which it encouraged more students from disadvantaged backgrounds to apply and be admitted to these universities appeared limited.

UCAS (November 2018) provided an update on sector efforts to minimise the risks of bias in university admissions. In the 2017 entry cycle,

six universities volunteered to run pilot projects to test name-blind applications. The update noted that none of the six projects produced conclusive evidence that masking applicants' names led to significantly different admissions outcomes. Overall, the value of having a second check on applications was endorsed both to act as a quality assurance mechanism to ensure decisions were correct and to minimise the risks of unconscious bias in individuals.

In a report for The Sutton Trust, Wyness (December 2017) offered analysis of the university admissions process (in particular: the UCAS form; the predicted grades system; and personal statements) and whether it may be a potential driver of the access gap. Amongst the conclusions, the report noted:

- High ability disadvantaged students lacked the information, advice and guidance needed in the university application process;
- High attaining disadvantaged students were more likely to have their grades under-predicted, resulting in them applying to less selective universities;
- Low attaining disadvantaged students were more likely to be matched to courses with similar students, while low attaining but advantaged students were more likely to be overmatched, and attend courses with higher ability peers; and
- There was a lack of transparency in the admissions process as a whole.

In a report to the Social Market Foundation, Gicheva and Petrie (January 2018) outlined the role of vocational education (e.g. BTECs) in preparing young people for higher education, and how students can be helped to pursue the most appropriate learning and career path. In analysis of a range of resources and data, the authors noted that vocational qualifications “are particularly important among students with demographic characteristics often associated with greater disadvantage” (p. 6) (for example if: they have resided in some regions, including the North West; they come from an ethnic minority background, or white working-class background; their parents work(ed) in routine or manual occupations).

The study found that students from vocational backgrounds are not always as well prepared as they could be for some university courses, “particularly when the course contains a scientific or mathematical component” (p. 7). In order for vocational Level 3 courses to reflect requirements at university, the authors recommended that the sector build on the improvements in module design which, itself, would require greater communication and collaboration with FE colleges and sixth forms, and develop appropriate mechanisms of support. The report authors recommended that there be a “national conversation aimed at raising the profile and status of technical and vocational qualifications” (p. 8), though getting students into university was “only half the story.”

Student outcomes after the first year

HEFCE (October 2017c) identified the outcomes for UK-domiciled UG students at the end of the first year of their first degree course. Their report noted that:

- The most common outcome for students was to continue into the second year in the same subject at the same institution. However, approximately one in five students did not continue straight on to the second year of their degree course.
- Leaving HE was identified as the second most common outcome.
- Students tended to change subject each year than to switch between universities. The least common outcome was found to be switching university, staying in the same subject area and entering at a year beyond the first year.

Teaching excellence

In an assessment of Year Two of the TEF (TEF2), the DfE (October 2017) judged it to be “operating in a fair and transparent way... [and leading to] clear and robust findings on the basis of the metrics... [with results] perceived as credible and reflecting teaching excellence across the sector” (p. 4). Whilst no changes were proposed in relation to the overall structure or methodology, some areas for improvement were

identified. For instance, it was proposed that, in order to reflect a broad-based assessment of teaching and outcomes, rather than a “narrow focus on teaching as it is conducted in lecture halls and seminar rooms”, the scheme would be known as the Teaching Excellence and Student Outcomes Framework (TEF).

The DfE summarised a few refinements to the assessment process. For instance: halving the weight of each National Student Survey (NSS) metric; recognising excellence in part-time provision more appropriately; and amending the TEF benchmarks to ensure that they reflected all types of disadvantage more appropriately. Further, in relation to the Longitudinal Education Outcomes (LEO) data, two additional metrics would be introduced, including, “The proportion of graduates in sustained employment that are earning over the median salary [i.e. £21,000] for 25-29 year olds or in further study” (p. 47).

Beech (October 2017) examined the key features of 12 provider submissions among 34 cases found by *Times Higher Education* to have had their award changed during the TEF process (six were eventually ranked Gold and six were ranked Silver). The report reported on key themes to emerge, buzzwords used, type of evidence, and common presentation strategies (e.g. structure, style or tone).

The analysis revealed that no two institutions shared the same approach to their narratives, though some common features were evident. Most institutions alluded to common themes, including research-led teaching, co-creation and employability initiatives. Several institutions drew attention to their staff employment strategies, as well as their provision of extra-curricular activities and student support systems. Rather than list resources and facilities, many institutions detailed how they were designed (e.g. with student input). Institutions drew on quantitative and qualitative evidence to substantiate claims of teaching excellence (quantitative evidence included user analytics whilst, in terms of qualitative data, QAA reviews were the most commonly referenced sources). Analysis of narratives revealed distinctiveness in each provider submission, with Beech noting

that, “The frequent occurrence of some words and concepts adds individuality to the submissions, with some institutions appearing confident, some appearing student-centred and others appearing creative or concept-driven” (p. 54). It was even noted that some providers employed flattery, “expressing agreement with the TEF and the Government’s efforts to measure teaching quality” (p. 54). The report found that those institutions adjudged as Gold tended to put students at the heart of their services, either by including student input or enhancing accessibility initiatives.

The HEA commissioned a ‘data-rich analysis’ of all TEF2 submissions, to understand “key trends and opportunities for the development of teaching excellence, and to evidence use and impact of HEA-led activities in the development of teaching excellence practice” (Moore et al., November 2017: 4). From their analysis, themes which distinguished Gold and Silver providers included:

- Talking more frequently in submissions about culture, values and ethos;
- Articulating a strategic plan;
- Investment in resources for teaching excellence;
- Applying principles and standards for course design;
- Giving consideration to personalised learning experiences for students; and
- Building skills and opportunities, such as volunteering, in co-curricular schemes.

There were some notable differences in patterns of content in submissions by size and type of HE institution (HEI). For instance, mechanisms for wider support of students through co- and extracurricular activities were most likely to be mentioned by larger as opposed to smaller HEIs. Post-92 HEIs were more likely to mention staff teaching qualifications, alignment of practices with the UK Professional Standards Framework, and use of staff appraisal mechanisms. Russell Group HEIs were more likely to mention aspects such as investment in libraries, co-curricular activities, and the role of clubs and societies.

The Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (HM Government,

November 2017) published the UK's *Industrial Strategy*. The TEF was referenced in relation to two other frameworks, Knowledge Exchange and Research Excellence which, together, would provide “a holistic view of how universities are delivering their threefold mission of generating knowledge through research, transmitting knowledge through teaching, and translating knowledge into practical uses through knowledge exchange” (p. 79).

Student engagement

The HEA's UK Engagement Survey (UKES), which was administered at 42 institutions in 2017, comprises seven engagement areas (critical thinking, learning with others, interacting with staff, reflecting and connecting, course challenge/independent learning, engagement with research and inquiry, staff-student partnerships), an optional skills development theme (covering academic, career and personal development), and optional questions on time spent on academic work and extracurricular activity. Just under 36,000 UGs responded to 2017's survey with 79 per cent of respondents based at post-92 institutions. Reflecting on three full years of data, Neves (November 2017) reported:

- There were year-on-year increases in students spending time interacting with staff, “areas in which engagement levels have traditionally been low” (p. 4).
- STEM subjects such as Mathematics and Physical Sciences had the highest taught workload, while the highest volumes of independent study tended to be within Arts subjects. Medicine and Mathematics stood out as having high volumes of both taught classes and independent workload, while Business and Administration students reported relatively low volumes of both.
- In terms of skills, results showed an increase in students reporting the development of soft skills. These included developing personal values, understanding others, how to become an active citizen, and how to explore complex real world problems.
- Although levels of career skills development were relatively high among students

domiciled outside the UK and those in their final year, it had fallen again in 2017.

- UK-domiciled students of Black and Chinese ethnicity reported engaging strongly in learning activities across the board, whilst also reporting development of a wide variety of skills at relatively high levels. It was surmised that there was a clear correlation between engagement and skills. The report posited that, “The results among Black students in particular provide a clear counterpoint to a range of data... which has pointed towards lower achievement levels” (p. 4).
- Study time, both scheduled and independent, had shown to have fallen significantly since 2016. Trend data indicated an increase in the number of students spending time in paid work, and caring, which was balanced by a decline in participation in sports clubs and/or societies.

Postgraduate experiences

84,556 students responded to the Postgraduate Taught Experience Survey (PTES) in 2017. There was “a positive endorsement of taught postgraduate education” (Bradley, October 2017: 4) which was indicated by 82 per cent of participants agreeing they were satisfied with the overall quality of their course. The report also noted “extremely positive” (p. 4) results in seven core areas (teaching and learning; engagement; assessment and feedback; dissertation or major project; organisation and management; resources and services; skills development); overall a slight positive trend since 2014. Information given to prospective students and access to resources were the most positive scoring areas, whereas the lowest scoring areas were assessment and course organisation. The report recommended that both workload and contact time merited attention. Finally, a question assessing retention vulnerability was added to the 2017 survey; 22 per cent of students considered leaving or suspending their study.

57,689 PGRs (approximately 53 per cent of the PGR student population) responded to the 2017 Postgraduate Research Experience Survey (PRES), which was administered at 117

institutions. Seven core scales relating to the PGR experience were measured: supervision; responsibilities; resources; research skills; research culture; professional development; and progress and assessment. Slight (September 2017) recorded that PGRs continued to have positive experiences, with 82 per cent agreeing that they were satisfied with their programme overall. This was consistent across the previous three survey cycles. All the aggregate scores across the main survey scales revealed a relationship with overall satisfaction and confidence to finish on time. As in the previous surveys, PGRs were most positive about the supervision they received and research skills developed, but less enthused about the research culture (e.g. being involved in the wider research community or department, which was most challenging for part-time PGRs). Students' experience of resources and research culture differed across disciplines. For example, Creative Arts and Design struggled with low scores in terms of suitable working spaces, discussing research with other research students, while Biological Sciences scores were high in these categories.

Peer review of teaching

In a 'rapid appraisal' for the HEA, Scott et al. (October 2017) examined the use of peer review of teaching (PRT) within UK HE. The appraisal involved: reviewing the published literature on methods and approaches to PRT; incorporating analysis of UK HEI peer review policies; and gathering the views of pro-vice-chancellors and/or academic development teams. The authors distinguished PRT from peer observation of teaching (POT), stating, "PRT is generally applied more widely... and it encompasses all approaches used to support student learning, while POT is used more specifically to describe observation of formal teaching in a classroom..." (p. 3). In terms of recommendations, the report authors advised that it was important for the PRT schemes to be collaborative, and to be 'fresh' rather than a 'tick box' exercise. Finally, it was noted that further work was needed to determine the scale and nature of student involvement, and closer ties were needed with continuing professional

development and scholarship of teaching and learning.

Assessment

The HEA published 18 case studies on assessment, emanating from their 'Transforming Assessment in Higher Education' symposia (Elkington and Evans, December 2017). The case studies are drawn from a range of institutions and settings, and focus on: assessment literacy; applying technology-enhanced assessment; and engaging students through assessment.

Peer learning and mentoring

Currens (December 2017) reported on an HEA-funded project that focused on best practice in peer learning and mentoring at 14 HE institutions in The Cathedrals Mission Group. Good practice was identified in relation to; scheme organisation; student recruitment; mentor training; links with academic knowledge, practice and skills; collaboration between staff and students; and evaluation of practice. However, it was recommended that further work was required in relation to; the development of a community of practice; links between schemes and strategic priorities; clarifying the drivers for scheme initiation and purpose; and in achieving collaboration between professional services and academic teams.

Academic integrity

Highlighting concern over the growth of 'contract cheating' (i.e. "when a third party completes work for a student who then submits it to an education provider as their own, where such input is not permitted" [p. 1]), the QAA (October 2017) published guidance that set out good practice around promoting academic integrity.

Degree algorithms

UUK (November 2017a) published the results of a joint UUK-GuildHE project into the configuration of degree algorithms; the processes or set of rules that determine a student's final degree classification. The project

was undertaken owing to “concerns that design decisions on degree algorithms were being systematically used to inflate the proportion of first or upper second class degrees” (p. 52). The report’s findings were based on 120 HEPs’ response to a survey and supplemented by 15 interviews. The study noted:

- 70 per cent of providers made changes to their degree algorithm when they last reviewed their academic regulations though, “many of these changes... amended specific rules or ... had limited impact on student outcomes” (p. 5). The most common reasons for change were in relation to standardising practice or responding to changes in pedagogical practice and design.
- Degree algorithms shared common components and practices which could be used to aid transparency and consistency of practice.
- A trend towards the use of a rules-based approach to consider the classification for students falling close to a grade boundary.
- A lack of appetite for adopting Grade Point Average.
- The design of degree algorithms was one of several factors that contributed to grade improvement.

The report made a number of recommendations, including: involving students in reviews of degree algorithms; ensuring the algorithms were transparent and accessible; publishing explanations for the design of degree algorithms; and including guidance and design principles as part of the Quality Code.

Student transfer

HEFCE (October 2017b) analysed transfer between HEIs made by first degree students, and who continue to study in the same subject area (i.e. between 1.5 and two per cent of UK-domiciled students). The report noted:

- Approximately six per cent of transferring students become distance learners, with almost one in four returning to their parental or own residence;

- London, a city with the greater density of HEIs, experienced the highest inter-institutional transfers;
- Students attending HEIs with low tariff points were most likely to transfer;
- Between 2012/13 and 2014/15, 29 per cent of students transferring between HEIs, but remaining in the same subject, went into the second year at their new institution (i.e. more likely to be transferring academic credit than those who switch into year one);
- Black and Asian students were less likely to transfer academic credit, as were those switching their mode of study to part-time or who moved home; and
- The qualifying rates for students who transfer were worse than for those that continued at the same HEI.

Mental health

The IPPR published a report on mental health in universities, based on a project funded by Universities UK and the Mental Health and Wellbeing in Higher Education Group (Thorley, September 2017). In addition to a review of the literature and analysis of key datasets (e.g. HESA, HEFCE), the report presented findings of a survey of 58 HEIs in England, Scotland and Wales, plus case study data from six UK universities. The study noted that there was significant variation in the extent to which HEIs were equipped to meet the challenge of addressing mental illness, distress and low wellbeing. In addition, underlying ‘structural’ problems were observed (e.g. “imperfections in NHS funding mechanisms” [p. 69]). The report advocated a ‘whole-university approach’, underpinned by common principles, such as: strong leadership, robust data, engagement with students and staff, and prevention and promotion.

In the PRES, for 2017 an additional optional section on personal outlook was included (Slight, September 2017). The survey asked questions such as: ‘I am satisfied with my life nowadays’; ‘I am satisfied with my work-life balance’; and ‘There is someone I can talk to about my day-to-day problems’. The findings shed some light on some potentially vulnerable

groups for retention within institutions; 60 per cent of those self-reporting a mental health condition considered leaving or suspending their course, compared to only 25 per cent of those with no mental health condition. Similarly in PTES 2017, 51 per cent of respondents with a mental health condition, ‘such as depression, schizophrenia or anxiety disorder’, considered leaving or suspending their study (Bradley, October 2017).

Seldon and Martin (September 2017) outlined their vision for a ‘positive university’ to combat mental illness, in a paper to HEPI. Citing thinking and practice in the USA, Australia and Mexico, as well as good practice in the UK, the authors highlighted a number of areas that merited attention. For example, in relation to transitioning to university, the authors advised;

- Encouraging all students to provide information about any difficulties that they have experienced (at the time of publication, the law prevents or restricts schools and medical authorities passing any details on to universities);
- Preparing students for university whilst at school or sixth form college;
- Connecting new students with ‘personal mentors’ before arriving at university;
- Developing buddy systems;
- Embedding mandatory regular meetings between the tutor and student;
- Establishing a matriculation ceremony, where students are formally introduced to the norms and ethos of the university;
- Incorporating a ‘balanced’ induction (i.e. avoiding a focus on excessive drinking at social events);
- Establishing a ‘school-university transition body’, to “develop co-ordinated strategies for enhancing positive mental health between both levels of education” (p. 45);
- Appointing a senior figure with the responsibility “for ensuring transitions are given senior priority” (p. 45); and
- Involving parents.

A synthesis of research on mental health in colleges and universities, Government mental health policy for students, support in FE and HE providers, and the legal and statutory

responsibilities of providers and issues raised were summarised in a House of Commons Library briefing paper by Connell-Smith and Hubble (December 2017).

Supporting disabled students

Williams et al. (October 2017) presented findings from the first phase of a two-part study, for HEFCE, to review the levels of support for disabled students across the HE sector in 2016/17 and the progress made by providers towards an inclusive social model of support. The study involved an online survey of 137 HEPs in receipt of HEFCE ‘additional funding’ to develop inclusive teaching approaches to support disabled students. This was supplemented by in-depth case studies with 13 providers which gathered detailed insights and feedback from 59 individuals in various roles (including both staff and student representatives). The report published eight ‘key indicators’:

- 90 per cent of HEPs had written policies describing the support and provision for disabled students, covering: assessment (91 per cent); teaching and learning (82 per cent); student support (80 per cent); accommodation (66 per cent); student experience (44 per cent); and inclusive curriculum design (43 per cent).
- On a scale of ‘one to ten’ in terms of inclusiveness, 60 per cent of HEPs rated themselves at ‘six’ or higher, though no providers considered themselves to be fully inclusive (at ‘ten’). 44 per cent felt they needed greater staff engagement with training, 38 per cent cited adjustments to estates and technology, whilst more inclusive assessments, and inclusive teaching and learning featured in 18 per cent and 11 per cent of responses, respectively.
- Lecture capture featured in 78 per cent of HEPs, but of these only 20 per cent recorded more than half of all lectures.
- In terms of estates, HEPs were more likely to have fully accessible social and recreational spaces than teaching and learning facilities or accommodation, though 52 per cent had an accessibility plan.

- 88 per cent of HEPs encouraged disclosure at all (measured) stages of the student lifecycle (i.e. pre-application, during application, pre-entry, at entry/induction, and on-course).
- Two-thirds of HEPs engaged with their students' unions or guilds on issues around disability services.
- 85 per cent of HEPs had recently or were taking steps to review their support for disabled students.
- Nearly all (98 per cent) of HEPs sought to evaluate the effectiveness or impact of their support for disabled students. Most did this by surveying their students, whilst 54 per cent undertook qualitative research.

Supporting progress

The HEA (November 2017), to draw attention to its National Retention Project (involving 14 institutions in the first phase, who benchmarked their practice against the HEA Retention Framework), published Falmouth University's retention experiences. As a result of the University's engagement with the Framework, a number of immediate changes were implemented, which included:

- Getting student mentors to talk to first year students about their progress and wellbeing;
- Using module data to diagnose problematic areas more readily;
- Improving staff access to student information;
- Developing a new guide for returning second year students; and
- Encouraging students to try out different skills outside the curriculum (a six week 'Workshop Festival' during the assessment period).

Ethnicity, equality and diversity

Citing HESA data, HEFCE (September 2017) noted that the number of UK-domiciled BME students starting full-time first degrees increased by 9.1 per cent in 2015/16 compared with the previous year (or, an increase of 34 per cent since 2010/11). There was a ten per cent annual increase in the number of UK-domiciled students of Asian ethnicity in 2015/16, compared with an increase of eight per cent of

Black students and a decrease of 3.9 per cent of students of Chinese ethnicity. Overall, BME students comprised 29 per cent of all entrants to full-time first degrees in 2015/16, despite these groups making up 18 per cent of the 15-year-old population in the 2011 census in England. However, while the participation rates of BME students increased, the outcomes for these groups lagged behind those of White students; BME students were less likely to achieve a first or upper second class degree. Chinese students had the lowest rates of non-continuation, while the rate for Asian students converged towards that for White students (a relatively big gap was present between 2008/09 and 2010/11). The difference between White and Black students also narrowed from 2012/13, but the non-continuation rate for Black students was 3.4 percentage points higher than the rate for White students.

The ECU released its fourth guide on conducting equality and diversity research in HE (Guyan, November 2017). The publication discusses the importance of critically reflecting on one's own identity, background and past experiences when conducting such research. Using data from HESA, the ECU (November 2017) also released reports providing a snapshot of age, disability, ethnicity and gender of staff and students in HE for the 2015/16 academic year, as well as on the interplay of these identities (e.g. female black students or male disabled staff).

Care leavers

Harrison (November 2017) reported on a project, that ran from November 2016 to March 2017, on care leavers and their pathways into and through HE. The study found that care leavers were around 11 per cent less likely to enter HE than other young people with similar demographic profiles and qualification levels; white care leavers and those with special educational needs were found to have particularly low participation rates. It was calculated that care leavers were around 38 per cent more likely to withdraw from a course and not return. Taking into account entry qualifications and demographic profiles, those

care leavers that did complete a degree were found to be as likely as other students to achieve a first or upper second class degree.

From a sample of 212 respondents to an online questionnaire, around two-thirds reported as having had positive experiences of HE, though over half considered leaving (disabled students were significantly more likely to have considered leaving university). The most common negative experiences during the transition to HE were: poor support from the local authority; difficulties in navigating changes; financial problems; and social or emotional issues.

Transgender experiences

Mckendry and Lawrence (December 2017) reported findings from the TransEdu Scotland project, that focused on the experience of trans and gender diverse applicants, students and staff in Scotland's colleges and universities. 86 per cent (n=135) of survey respondents reported experiencing high levels of barriers to their learning or work. The biggest challenge concerned peer relationships and the study flagged numerous issues around the provision of gender neutral facilities, and navigating administrative processes. 35 per cent (n=44) of survey respondents indicated that they had withdrawn from a course before completion (among the university respondents, a higher proportion than general withdrawal rates for UG study in Scotland). The study also found that there was a reluctance to speak to the institution about matters related to trans status. Of the people interviewed (n=20), a majority expressed frustration at the expectations placed upon them to educate peers, colleagues and institutions.

Sexual harassment

In a briefing paper to the House of Commons Library, Long and Hubble (December 2017) provided an overview of the issue of sexual harassment in post-16 institutions, summarising evidence from the National Union of Students, Office of the Independent Adjudicator, *The Guardian* (which, in March 2017, reported that students had made at least 169 allegations of sexual misconduct against academic and non-

academic staff from 2011/12 and 2016/17). The paper also summarised the sector's response to the problem of rising incidents of sexual harassment and violence.

In an evaluation of HEFCE's Social Innovation Learning Pilots (six projects in total), that ran from 2016 to 2017, the report featured a project involving LJMU - led by Newham University (Brown, December 2017); 'Let's Talk about Sex' was aimed at equipping students to explore innovative ways of communicating about sexual violence.

Student wellbeing – gambling

Drawing upon data from online interviews conducted with 1,000 UGs by YouthSight, the Gambling Commission (September 2017) reported on the impact of gambling on students. One in eight student gamblers had missed lectures owing to gambling; one in four student gamblers spent more than they could afford; and four per cent of student gamblers were in debt because of gambling (one in four students who had a gambling debt, had accrued debts in excess of £10,000).

Student fees

In a reflection on student fees, since the introduction of the £9,000 charge, The Sutton Trust proposed a series of recommendations aimed at supporting access to higher education (Cullinane and Montacute, November 2017). The Trust advocated:

- A system of means-tested fees, waiving fees entirely for those from low income backgrounds;
- Restoring maintenance grants; and
- Increasing teaching grants, "to offset losses through lower fee income."

Enterprise and entrepreneurship

The QAA (January 2018) released an update to its 2012 publication on enterprise and entrepreneurship education and featured "a new breadth of impact measures" along with enhanced definitions. HEFCE's (October 2017a) 'Higher Education-Business and Community Interaction' survey for 2015/16

revealed that the number of graduate start-ups (i.e. companies formed within two years of graduation, where the graduate has received assistance from the HEI) decreased from 4,160 (2014/15) to 3,890 (2015/16) though, it was noted, “the number surviving three or more years rose significantly” (p. 28).

Prospects, HECSU and AGCAS (November 2017) reported that 4.5 per cent of the 2015/16 cohort of graduates were self-employed, freelance or had started their own business (p. 13). The subjects with the highest levels of self-employment, freelance or business start-up were Performing Arts (23.1 per cent), Cinematics and Photography (21.2 per cent), Fine Art (17.8 per cent), Design (12 per cent) and Media Studies (10.3 per cent). The lowest levels were recorded in Biology (1.5 per cent), Sociology (1.6 per cent), Geography (1.7 per cent), Finance and Accountancy (1.8 per cent) and Civil Engineering (2.3 per cent).

Employability

Prospects, HECSU and AGCAS’s (November 2017) *What Do Graduates Do?* takes an in-depth look at HESA’s Destinations of Leavers from Higher Education (DLHE) survey which seeks to understand what UK-domiciled graduates do (six months) after graduation. There were 248,525 responses to the 2015/16 survey (78.5 per cent of the total cohort). Overall:

- 54.8 per cent were in full-time employment in the UK, 12.3 per cent part-time, 1.8 per cent working overseas, 5.3 per cent working and studying, and 15.7 per cent were in further study. 5.3 per cent were classified as unemployed. Most were employed as health professionals (16.9 per cent) followed by retail, catering, waiting and bar roles (11.1 per cent). 71.4 per cent of employed graduates were in professional-level positions.
- There were particularly large rises in the number of graduates entering roles in nursing, graphic design, marketing, art, sports, cinematography and photography, finance and accounting, and coding and software development. However, large falls were recorded in the number of graduates

entering primary and nursery education, medicine, web design and civil engineering.

- In spite of concerns about the gig economy and zero-hours contracts, most graduates (61 per cent) were on permanent, full-time contracts, which was unchanged from the previous year.

Work-based learning

Ulster University’s provision of placements, where 40 per cent of undergraduates undertake a sandwich placement and, since 2015, all full-time undergraduate students are required to undertake a compulsory and assessed period of work experience, was the focus of a case study published by the HEA (September 2017).

University-business partnerships

Innovations in learning and teaching and employability were some of the themes identified in Deloitte LLP’s (October 2017) evaluation report of HEFCE’s Catalyst Fund. For instance, in the projects audited, it was noted that greater student productivity was evident as a result of industry-relevant training, through employer engagement in curriculum design and training. Some universities demonstrated the benefits of new technologies (e.g. virtual reality and augmented reality) to upskill students and reduce attrition.

Intentions after graduation

Since 2013, the Intentions After Graduation Survey (IAGS) is administered to final year UGs as an optional online-only survey attached to the end of the NSS. A new version of the IAGS came into effect in 2017/18; HEFCE released findings of feedback and cognitive test results, which was undertaken by IFF Research (December 2017).

Graduate retention

In analysis undertaken as part of UUK’s (December 2017b) *Graduate Retention* report, significant regional variations were found, including differences by subject studied and employment industry entered into. The report

published regional case studies that addressed one or more of the following key aims:

- Retaining graduates in the region to fill specific skills shortage vacancies;
- Highly-skilled job creation to encourage graduate retention; and
- Promotion and support of local graduate entrepreneurship.

Graduate wellbeing

HEFCE (November 2017) attempted to capture the effect of HE on a graduate's life. Using data from the Office for National Statistics, the report noted that graduates tended to be more satisfied with their lives than non-graduates, but also more anxious. This was most prevalent in London which led to the conclusion that, "the difference between the satisfaction and anxiety dimensions of wellbeing highlighted the inadequacy of using a single measure to summarise graduates' wellbeing" (p. 3).

Graduates were less likely than non-graduates to experience extremely low wellbeing, but also less likely to experience extremely high wellbeing, and graduates were less affected by negative life circumstances than non-graduates.

Students and Brexit

As evidenced in the previous year, the 'youthquake' has been a noticeable feature of social change and public debate in the UK. In a poll administered to 1,018 full-time undergraduates by HEPI/YouthSight (December 2017), 62 per cent indicated that they would support a second referendum on the final Brexit deal.

Internationalisation

In UCAS (December 2017) admissions data, acceptances from the EU fell by 2.1 per cent in 2017, compared with the previous year.

However, whilst acceptances from most European countries fell (e.g. Germany, Ireland, Romania and Bulgaria), acceptances from other countries increased (most notably Portugal, Lithuania, Poland and Spain). The number of acceptances from outside the EU to UK providers increased by five per cent.

Oxford Economics (December 2017) estimated that in 2014/15 international students' exports, their tuition fees and other payments to universities, off campus spending, and the spending of their visitors together generated £25.8 billion in gross output in the UK (p. 24). In total, universities and their international students and visitors supported over 940,000 jobs in the UK, equivalent to three per cent of total UK employment.

UKCISA (November 2017) published the outputs of 13 pilot projects from its Grant Scheme 2016/17. The funding was intended "to develop ideas and test out good practices" (p. 1). Seven projects focused on the student experience (e.g. using social media to engage Chinese students; online training tool for global students; and a student safety awareness campaign), five on teaching and learning (e.g. a writing boot camp), and one on supporting staff, via an online module on entry clearance requirements of visa applications.

Allinson (December 2017a), in a report produced by the Go International programme based at UUKi, reflected on the 'Widening Participation in UK Outward Student Mobility' project. In providing a picture of mobility participation rates for disadvantaged and underrepresented students (i.e. students from a low socio-economic background; students from low participation neighbourhoods; BME students; students with a disability; and students who are care leavers), the study noted:

- All of the target demographic groups were underrepresented in mobility numbers, and students with overlapping disadvantages had even lower rates of participation. Short-term mobility (one to four weeks) was more attractive to the project's target groups.
- In 2015/16, students from higher socio-economic backgrounds were 65 per cent more likely to participate in outward mobility than their peers from lower socio-economic backgrounds. When looking at BME students from low socio-economic backgrounds, participation rates were lower than their White counterparts from the same socio-economic background. For Black students, the participation rate was 1.2 per

cent and for Asian students it was one per cent, compared to the 1.6 per cent for their White peers.

- In 2015/16, the participation rate was 1.8 per cent for students from areas with high participation in HE and one per cent from low participation areas.
- In 2015/16, BME students represented 22.2 per cent of the student cohort but only 17.6 per cent of the outwardly mobile group. Further, only the Asian or Asian British (Indian), Chinese, and Other (including mixed) ethnic groups had participation rates equal to or above the HE sector average of 1.7 per cent. Asian or Asian British (Bangladeshi) students and Asian or Asian British (Pakistani) students had the lowest participation rates for the demographic: 0.6 per cent and 0.8 per cent respectively.
- In 2015/16, 1.5 per cent of students with a disability participated in outward mobility. This represented an increase from 1.1 per cent in 2013/16, though still below the HE sector average for the year. Students with two or more conditions were engaging with mobility at the lowest rate (0.9 per cent) compared to their peers; students with a physical impairment or mobility issues had a one per cent participation rate; and blind or visually impaired students participated at a rate of 1.1 per cent.
- In 2015/16, the care leavers' participation rate amounted to one per cent, and well below the sector average.

UUKi released a toolkit that highlighted features of good practice in outward mobility and illustrated student perspectives from the project's target groups (Allinson, December 2017b).

HE challenges

Stephanie Marshall (November 2017), Chief Executive Officer of the HEA, outlined a few key challenges for the sector, as seen by 11 university presidents or 'global leaders' from nine countries (the UK, US, Australia, Hong Kong, Singapore, Japan, Israel, South Africa, and the Netherlands). The leaders identified technology as an accelerator of progress in

teaching and learning, and highlighted the need to bring about a parity of esteem between education and research within HE.

Interdisciplinarity, the development of curricula that was 'connected' (e.g. more project-based, industrial links) were other key challenges. Respondents reflected on the purpose of universities and viewed the socio-political context as presenting a particular challenge or, as expressed by one respondent, "(Higher education must) proactively and vocally challenge the anti-globalisation and anti-intellectual rhetoric..." (p. 4).

Arts education

In a policy note to HEPI, Professor John Last, Vice-Chancellor of Norwich University of the Arts (NUA), reflected on the state of the creative arts in the UK. The policy note was informed by a NUA study that examined the factors influencing the uptake of Art and Design subjects at Key Stages 3 (age 11-14) and 4 (age 14-16) at state schools in Norwich. Last posited that, in focusing on graduate employment outcomes, "a less diverse school system and a poorer match between pupils' attributes and their education" would develop (p. 1).

University-schools partnerships

UUK (November 2017b) published four case studies evidencing impact from university-school partnerships. UUK recommended a flexible approach to such partnerships which it considered could be "implemented by recognising a number of models of engagement, which align the expertise, resources and mission of the university with the needs of the school, and the local context within which both are operating" (p. 18).

HE workforce

HEFCE (September 2017) noted that there were 340,000 staff employed by English HEIs in 2015/16 (In Oxford Economics' (December 2017) analysis of the 2014/15 UK staff returns, this was equivalent to 1.3 per cent of all employment in the UK in 2015 and the growth witnessed between 2011/12 and 2014/15 of 6.8 per cent represented "the fastest rate of growth

than in the whole economy” [p. 12]). HEFCE posited that large equality and diversity challenges were evident, and acute among senior staff, who were overwhelmingly white and male; three-quarters of all professors were male. 29 per cent of all academic staff were non-UK nationals, with more than half of these coming from EU countries. International staff were on average younger and more likely to be in research-intensive universities.

HESA’s (February 2018) *Staff in Higher Education* provides detailed data on academic and non-academic staff employed at UK HEPs and includes information on personal and demographic characteristics. New data featured in 2016/17, which looked at teaching qualifications held by academic staff with a teaching component (teaching only, and teaching and research) to their contracts (English HEPs only). 65.5 per cent of all staff had a teaching qualification, though the proportion of full-time staff (71 per cent) and staff on open-ended/permanent contracts (69.6 per cent) was higher than for part-time staff (55.9 per cent) and staff on fixed-term contracts (51.6 per cent).

Academic libraries

SCONUL outlined the future role of academic libraries and articulated numerous ‘paradigms’ to challenge current thinking (Pinfield et al., November 2017). It was recognised that the library of the future would need to: work closely with user communities; offer greater clarity on the ‘print-to-electronic shift’; examine implications of the ‘inside-out’ library; encourage innovation (including ‘high-risk innovation’); and review the current staff skills base.

Alternate providers

In their review of the DfE and ‘alternate providers’ of higher education (APs), the NAO (October 2017) concluded that there was a stronger oversight framework as well as evidence showing APs helping in widening access to HE for under-represented groups of students. However, the study report also noted that graduates from APs had lower rates of

progression into employment or further study, and lower salaries than graduates of publicly-funded providers. HEFCE (September 2017) also noted that “APs have a student body that is on average more ethnically diverse and older than the rest of the sector” (p. 3).

In a small-scale qualitative study for the DfE, Skipp and Hopwood (October 2017) explored the validation and franchise process for awarding HE in APs.

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