

# GRADUATE OUTCOMES COHORT B REVIEW

C17071 2017/18  
JULY 2019

HESA



## **Graduate Outcomes**

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## SECTION 1 - THE GRADUATE OUTCOMES PROGRAMME

This update provides an overview of the second cohort of the new Graduate Outcomes survey which launched on Monday 4 March 2019. Overall, while we're closing the response rate gap compared to cohort A, response rates remain an area of focus for the team. In particular, the online completion rate is not as high as we'd like.

One of our key challenges has been ensuring the successful delivery of email. As part of our engagement strategy, we send a high volume of email which has meant dealing with a spam filtering challenge on a significant scale. We continue to work to ensure that our emails are not mistaken as unsolicited email and therefore blocked by internet service providers. I am optimistic that the actions we've taken (see section 4) will improve this.

In addition to spam filtering, and to give us the best chance of making contact, it's critical that we also have accurate contact details. In May, we let you know that for nearly 19% of graduates in cohort A, all telephone numbers supplied were unobtainable (i.e. they did not work). In cohort B, this has reduced to 10%, which is fantastic. However, if we had 10% unobtainable in cohort D, over 54,000 graduates would not receive contact from us by phone. We've included more information on how we're looking forward to cohort D in section 5.

Assuming the graduate receives an email, the next problem we're facing is whether they trust the message. We know that many graduates are wary of following unique-link URLs, especially from senders they don't know. This is likely to be further complicated as the graduates that we're surveying presently may not have been undertaking study when the Graduate Outcomes survey was launched and therefore may have missed out on any direct awareness raising by their Higher Education (HE) provider. We are working through the short and long-term options to address these issues.

I am also keen to ensure that we're working with HE providers in the right way. We want to increase the online response rate, not just because it improves the response rate overall, but because online completion is significantly cheaper. This saving is one that will directly impact provider costs. We believe that graduates trust email communication from their HE provider more than the 'Graduate Outcomes team' (especially if they are not aware of what Graduate Outcomes is at the point at which they receive the email). This has already driven the way we use provider logos, present the 'from' email address and the way the email is signed off, but we need to do more. While being mindful of survey bias, HESA will be evaluating the way we work with providers over the coming weeks. At the very minimum, we want to ensure that provider 'warm up' contact is made directly with the graduate, prior to the HESA team making contact with graduates.

Finally, we were pleased to open the supply of raw survey data in May via the provider portal. I appreciate this was later than expected and I'd like to thank you for your patience and co-operation with the data sign off form. We're listening to your feedback and appreciate that this data, due to its nature, has limited use at this stage. We have a separate workstream looking at the final release and this will consider the impact on low performing groups. We hope to bring you more information on this later this year, including details on our final data delivery plan and quality assurance strategies.

**Rob Phillpotts**  
**Managing Director, Statutory Services**

## SECTION 2 - OUR COHORT B FINDINGS

### RESPONSE RATES

As at Saturday 1 June (based on the previous day's surveying), the overall cohort B response rate is **45.7%**. The breakdown by domicile can be found in the table below:

Domicile	Target	Response rate
UK domiciled, full-time	60%	51.8%
UK domiciled, part-time	60%	53.9%
Research funded	65%	59.2%
EU domiciled	45%	<b>45.2%</b>
Non-EU domiciled	25%	<b>27.6%</b>

Note: All results published on the provider portal or in communications from HESA are provisional due to the nature of the live data feed and the fact we are carrying out continual quality assurance.

As evident from the table above, we were successful in achieving the national target for EU and non-EU domiciled target groups. We have closed the gap between the target and the achieved response rate for research funded graduates, compared with cohort A. Please review further response rate and engagement statistics in our cohort B infographic in section 3.

We continue to focus on achieving a higher response rate for UK domiciled graduates. As part of this effort, we prioritised calling this group over others during the last few weeks of the survey fieldwork. We sent out a final SMS to this population in the last few hours of data collection and received a positive response. IFF Research also re-contacted several graduates who they had previously coded as 'did not graduate' and managed to convert some of these into completed responses. We have also strengthened interviewer guidance to help them obtain a completed response from these graduates in the first attempt.

We have reviewed the quality of contact details submitted by providers. This review was limited to phone numbers (mobile, landline and international) only and did not include email addresses due to the blacklisting issue mentioned in section 4. This review found that 7.5% of Home domiciled graduates could not be contacted via phone as all of the numbers submitted by providers were invalid (did not work). This number was much higher for non-UK graduates, at 17.6%. This is an area we need to address with providers to ensure we are able to make contact via this mode.

### ENGAGEMENT STRATEGY

In light of ongoing challenges with our email deliveries (see section 4), we increased the number of rounds of SMS messages to six (five in cohort A). These proved to be very successful on every occasion; resulting in a short, sharp burst of online responses.

In both cohorts A and B, the number of respondents completing the survey on a smartphone has been higher than those completing it on a desktop. These include responses via SMS reminders and emails. This is unsurprising given the characteristics of the respondents. The online survey is already compatible for mobile and desktop devices, but we are making every effort to further optimise it. We have also observed in the last two cohorts that most responses via smartphones are received between 4pm and 6pm – likely during commuting time. We are therefore sending further SMS messages around this time in order to maximise returns.

For telephone interviewing, we have noticed an improvement in the time taken to complete the survey. On average it has taken 2 minutes shorter to complete the survey; indicating an increased level of familiarity with the survey among IFF interviewers. On average, it took 4.7 call attempts to get a completed response. This includes surveys that were completed on mixed modes. Those who did not respond to the survey or only partially completed it were called an average of 11 times. You can view these engagement statistics on the infographic in section 3.

### SURVEY MODIFICATIONS IN COHORT B

At the end of cohort A, we noticed a high drop out rate on the welcome screen (the first screen of the survey) and a further sizeable drop out just before the second question. It is inevitable that some respondents will drop out after opening the survey but, in order to reduce the volumes, we merged the welcome screen with the first question (which was on a separate page). Over the course of cohort B, we have seen a small but noticeable change in the drop out rate before the second question. You'll see on the infographic in section 3 that of all graduates who drop out of the survey, 80% drop out here – this has reduced from 89%. It's positive to see the impact of subtle changes we can make to improve the online survey. We're looking to make additional changes to the survey for cohort D that will address other drop out questions e.g. what is your job title in the census week? Refer to section 4 to review the changes we've made going into cohort C.

Another change made during cohort B related to the display of currencies in the online survey. Following feedback from interviewers and having reviewed the data on currency, we reordered the list of currencies by placing British Pounds, Euros and US Dollars at the top of the list. This is likely to improve the ease of answering this question, both in self-administered and interviewer-administered surveys. We will look to provide an update on how this impacts question completion.

### USE OF PROVIDER LOGO FOR BRAND AWARENESS

As part of the submission of contact details in the provider portal, we also ask providers to personalise the survey by submitting their provider's logo. This appears on the front of every email and on the online survey. As Graduate Outcomes is a new survey, we believe providers have a role to play in establishing the brand, so it is recognised by their graduates as a legitimate and safe survey to take part in.

Over the past cohorts, we have observed that the online response rate for those providers with a logo is 4% points higher than those without. While this difference may be attributed to factors other than brand recognition, until we know the reasons, it is recommended that all providers submit a logo. Find out how to [upload your provider logo](#) in the provider portal.

## SECTION 3 - RESPONSE RATES AND ENGAGEMENT STATISTICS

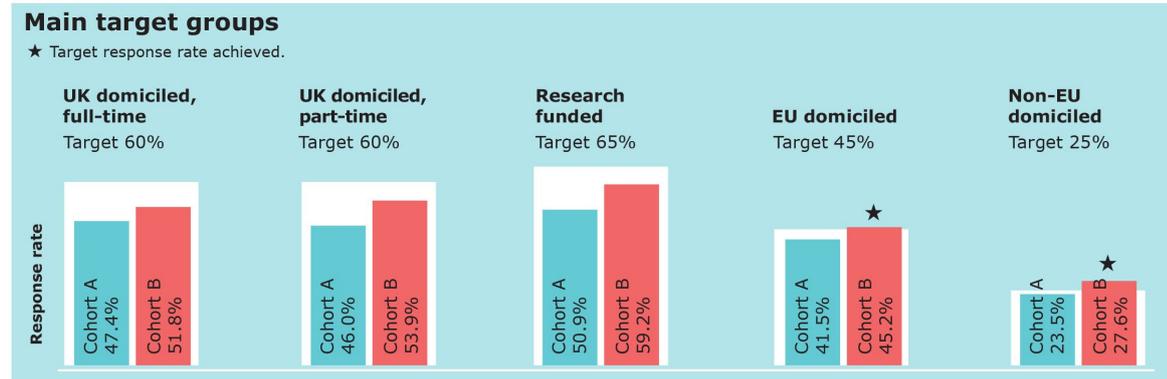
[View full printable version »](#)

# Cohort B

Opened on **Monday 4 March 2019** and closed on **Friday 31 May 2019**.

## Response rates

All response rates and results published prior to the final release of data are provisional due to the nature of the live data feed and the fact we are carrying out continual quality assurance.



Overall cohort B response rate



18,472 total completed responses



### Partial responses 1,642

These are graduates who answered at least the first question but did not complete the survey. Actively encouraging completions forms a key part of the engagement strategy.

#### Of all graduates who drop out of the survey:

**80%** drop out on "What activities were you doing in the census week?"

**12%** drop out on "What was your job title during the census week?"



### Mode of completion:



## Engagement statistics



**4** rounds of email invitations sent



**6** rounds of SMS messages sent

1 additional SMS message was sent to counter the effect of the email delivery issues. See section 4 of the review to learn more.

#### Average number of phone calls needed for a completed survey response



This includes responses started online as well as by phone.

### Best time of day for completions



Phone



Desktop



Mobile

### Average time taken to complete



Phone **13** minutes, **46** seconds

↑ 2.5 minutes quicker than cohort A



Online **11** minutes, **11** seconds

↓ 33 seconds slower than cohort A

### Unique page views of the Graduate Outcomes websites (to 31 May 2019)

[graduateoutcomes.ac.uk](http://graduateoutcomes.ac.uk)

English website:  
**55,014**

Welsh website:  
**682**

@grad\_outcomes  
followers: **751**



## SECTION 4 - MODIFICATIONS FOR COHORT C

### UPDATE ON EMAIL BLACKLISTING

As noted in [previous reviews](#), we have been experiencing some issues with the delivery of emails to graduates due to key providers (e.g. Gmail, Office 365) blacklisting the IP address<sup>1</sup> which we use to send email. We've always known that, as with any mass email marketing, we must adhere to email best practice to ensure our invitations are not blocked by spam filters. The statutory nature of this communication does not give our emails higher priority.

This has impacted response rates and HESA has been working closely with Conformat to identify a solution. As we've previously noted, this has included changes to the setup of our IP address, updates to the email content and staggering the distribution frequency of emails. Conformat have been closely monitoring their systems as emails have been dispatched and we have noticed improvements over the cohort.

In discussion with Conformat, HESA has determined that the best course of action is to engage with a third-party company who provides expertise in managing the sending of emails. It is likely that this will involve bolting on a new piece of software which will distribute our invitations more effectively, increasing their delivery rate.

It is absolutely vital that this issue is resolved in readiness for cohort D where we will be dispatching approximately 5 million emails over the fieldwork period. We are currently working to appoint a third party and agree the scope for this work in the next few weeks so we can complete the testing within cohort C.

### SURVEY MODIFICATIONS

During the implementation of the first two cohorts, we identified areas of the survey that could be improved in order to enhance user experience, which in turn would impact non-response and data quality.

Modifications were only made where they were necessary and would enable us to collect better quality data. We ensured they had no impact on the integrity of the survey itself and were not likely to introduce bias. Therefore, most changes made for cohort C have been minor wording amendments to questions and instruction text to aid usability and accessibility for graduates.

There has been one significant change in the survey (made for cohort C), which involves routing functionality that we've added. This is to enable graduates (who have said their two working activities are the same) to only be asked one set of questions regarding their activities, instead of being asked two sets about the same activity. This is an important and necessary change to help mitigate survey fatigue and improve the flow of the survey.

### CHANGING CONTACT CENTRE TELEPHONE NUMBERS TO PREVENT BLOCKING

During the setup of the contact centre calling system, IFF Research recommended the use of a geo-dialling system. This involves matching the telephone area code displayed to graduates with the location of their provider. The aim being to provide familiarity and increase the likelihood of

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<sup>1</sup> An IP address is a logical numeric address that is assigned to every single computer, printer, switch, router or any other device that is part of a TCP/IP-based network. The IP address is the core component on which the networking architecture is built; no network exists without it.

them answering a call rather than ignoring or rejecting it (as they might from an unknown / unrecognisable number).

The decision to adopt the geo-dialling model in Graduate Outcomes was partly based on a trial that IFF Research ran for the 2016/17 DLHE, which led to better pick up and conversion rates. This is supported more generally by existing best practice within the market research sector.

Despite the clear benefits of a geo-dialling system, the use of phone numbers that are visible but unknown to respondents does still increase the likelihood that they will ignore or block the calls, especially where they are called multiple times from the same number. It is therefore important to consider any steps that can be taken to reduce this behaviour, with a view to increasing levels of response.

A relatively simple and effective option is to change the telephone numbers used during fieldwork, once or possibly multiple times, whilst retaining the geographical link to the area of each provider. Following discussion with the Graduate Outcomes Steering Group, the decision was made to work with and take advice from IFF Research to change the geo-dialling numbers during cohort C and D. A second batch of geographically located phone numbers has been set up and will be activated mid-cohort C. Analysis will be undertaken to see if this has a benefit in increasing telephone response rates.

## CHANGES TO WELSH ENGAGEMENT STRATEGY

Following dialogue with Welsh providers and the Steering Group, a Welsh Language Working Group was set up to make recommendations regarding the use of the Welsh language within Graduate Outcomes. The Working Group met on 21 March 2019 and a number of recommendations were identified which revolved around HESA identifying graduates returned with data in the Welsh Speaker Indicator field within the student collection (WELSSP). This would then be used to identify three different scenarios for the use of English and Welsh for SMS messages, email invitations and telephone appointments.

The Steering Group formally accepted these recommendations at its meeting on 3 April 2019 and HESA is pleased to confirm that this work was completed in readiness for cohort C. This has involved the creation of additional email and SMS templates and the inclusion of WELSSP in the respondent data.

Separately, the Working Group took part in a wide-reaching discussion regarding the correct translation for 'Graduate Outcomes' as there are multiple translations in use across the sector. 'Hynt Graddedigion' was agreed upon (a) as it is a suitable translation and (b) it has to date been widely used in communications and media by providers (it is used in the logo). HESA has updated all communication materials and asks that providers that supply their communications to graduates in Welsh also ensure the same translation is used.

HESA would like to thank colleagues on the Welsh Language Working Group for their valuable input.

## SECTION 5 - LOOKING TOWARDS COHORT D

As we've demonstrated in our reviews to date, as we draw ever closer to the opening of cohort D in September, we're continually making improvements to the survey and engagement strategy to put us in a good position for the largest cohort. These measured changes are not only making in-roads at a cohort by cohort level, but their cumulative effects provide continuous improvement.

We have developed a focused response rates workstream within HESA to drive forward innovation in terms of the tactics and initiatives we can deploy to boost response rates. As these are deployed, we will provide updates within these reviews. This is not a short-term project, it considers a longer term view towards future collections and considers other aspirations and methodologies for the survey. This will not just result in activities undertaken by HESA, but the ways HESA can enable providers to support this essential focus.

### PROVIDER PORTAL DEVELOPMENTS

As you will read in section 6, the provider portal development team have been working hard over cohorts A and B to provide the raw survey data supply to providers. This went live at the end of May 2019. The portal development roadmap continues to grow following provider feedback and internal aspirations to enhance our reporting functionality and we're now making preparations for the next collection.

#### **Sector response rate report – just launched!**

On Monday 1 July, we launched an additional report to the 'Reports' tab which will provide the current [sector survey response rates](#).

This new report is viewable to the Graduate Outcomes Survey Results User (as per the other reports in this section) and it will include response rates at cohort level, including the data of all providers in the population for Graduate Outcomes. Providers will be able to filter in the same way as the 'Provider survey response rates' report, and as per all of the data in the portal, it is a continual feed, updated on a regular basis. This includes after a cohort is closed.

### IMPROVING OUR EMAIL INVITATION FORMAT AND LOOK AND FEEL

As we've reported in section 4, we are looking to engage with a third party to improve the deliverability of our vital email invitations. Alongside focusing on the delivery of the emails, we are continuing to make improvements to the email design and content, whilst avoiding making them more susceptible to being blocked by spam filters.

It is aimed that the third party will provide rich insight on behaviour of graduates upon receipt of our email invitations which allows us to undertake more test and learn activity. This will include testing subject lines, use of images, colours, visual improvements to the call to action (survey link) and much more.

These changes can only be tested when we have suitable conditions to be able to fully determine their effect so we will be working on these throughout cohort C and implementing them when we have the new technology in place to draw conclusions.

## IMPROVING OUR PRE-SURVEY GRADUATE CONTACT GUIDANCE

We know from our work looking at response rates, that engagement with the online survey is dependent on recognition of the Graduate Outcomes brand. Providers play a key role in legitimising the online survey via their own direct and trusted engagement routes. To do this, it's important that providers are engaging with the cohort population directly in the build up to the contact period commencing.

The current guidance on the HESA website suggests key points at which providers should be making contact with graduates prior to surveying. We know from feedback that we need to do more to ensure this is understood and being carried out by all providers. To help you, we're creating a simple contact plan that will provide the key points in the year that providers should be looking to send relevant communications to the appropriate populations. We will shortly be launching this on the HESA website and we will also email providers at the appropriate times as a trigger.

We are looking into additional ways we can support providers to complete this activity such as events and training. We're also creating [Graduate Outcomes provider case studies](#) to capture new and innovative approaches to promoting the survey. We're keen to grow and develop these case studies so the sector can continue to learn and be inspired. It also allows us to continue to develop our view of what is 'best practice' together.

We would like to invite all providers to create a case study to share with the sector on the HESA website. This can be on your holistic approach or focused on a specific part of it e.g. how you're using graduation ceremonies, staff engagement, approaches to obtaining updated contact details and checking contact details for accuracy. We have created a template to prompt you in writing your case studies so please [contact us](#) if you'd like to use it.

## SECTION 6 - OTHER UPDATES

### DATA DISSEMINATION

In May, HESA provided access to the following reports within the new 'Reports' section in the provider portal: Survey response rates, SIC / SOC coding, Results data. These reports are available to those who have been assigned the Survey Results User IDS role.

To support providers with the raw data, a new [C17072 Graduate Outcomes Survey Results coding manual](#) launched as well as other useful guidance. We know that providers need further guidance to ensure they comply with the data usage sign off form but are still able to make use of the data for their needs. We're working to provide this guidance to support your internal reporting requirements.

If your provider only has graduates in cohort D, there is no action for you to take unless you'd like to review the coding manual to understand the format of this data. You will be able to access the new Survey Results User role and the data once the new subscription agreement is in place later in the year.

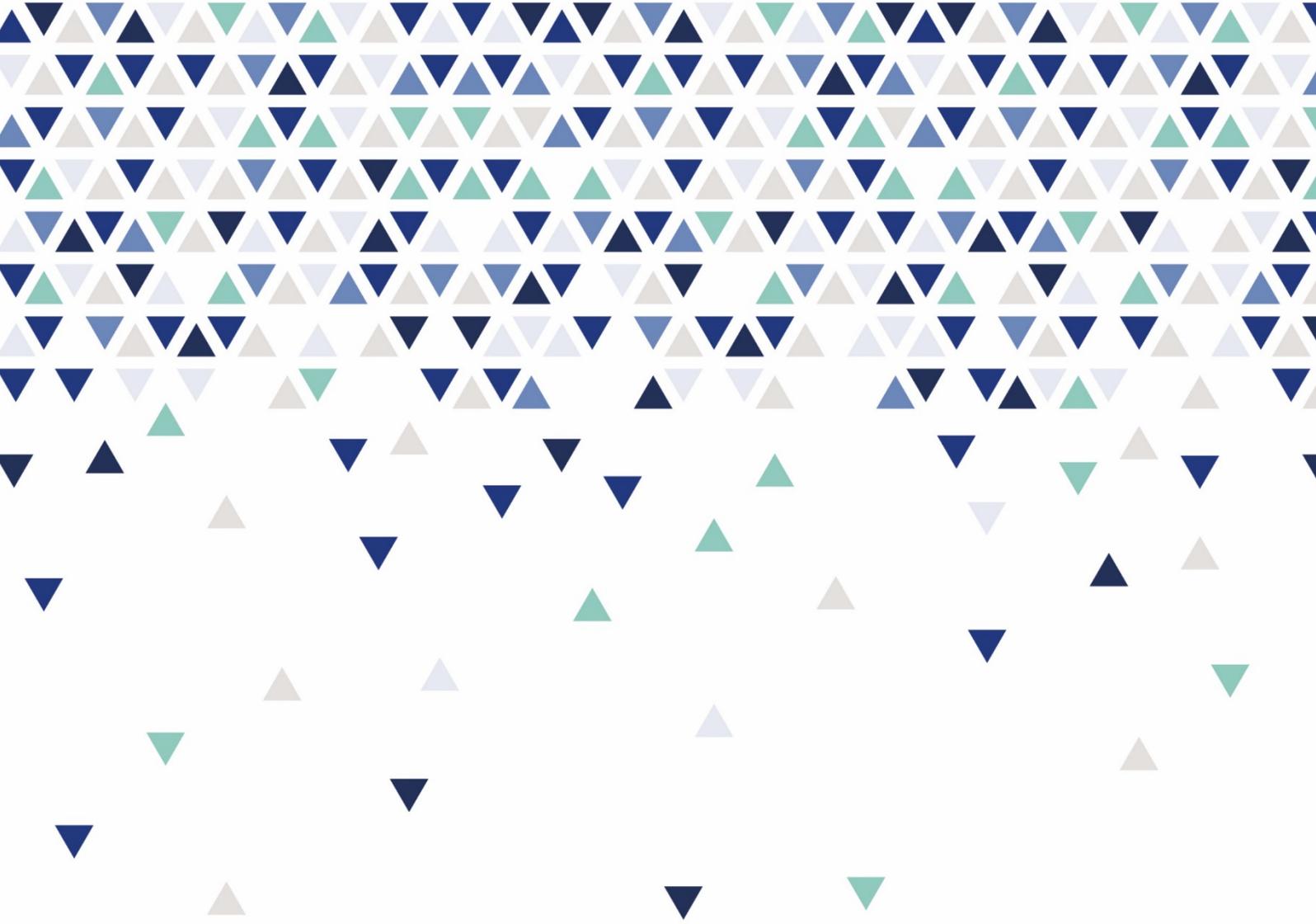
Work continues internally to develop the strategy for the final delivery of data which will be made available in Spring 2020.

## PROVIDER QUESTIONS

In June 2018, we took the decision to postpone the inclusion of the provider questions in the survey due to the legal, financial and operational complexities which surround these and to allow providers to manage the potential demand for these.

Many of these complexities still exist and, above and beyond normal operational activity, we are currently focusing internal resource on improving email invitation deliverability, continuous survey improvement and strategies to boost online response rates. We have therefore decided to postpone provider questions for another collection. We will review this decision again this time next year (June 2020).





## FIND OUT MORE ABOUT GRADUATE OUTCOMES

Website: [www.hesa.ac.uk/innovation/outcomes](http://www.hesa.ac.uk/innovation/outcomes)  
Graduate website: [www.graduateoutcomes.ac.uk](http://www.graduateoutcomes.ac.uk)  
Twitter: [https://twitter.com/grad\\_outcomes](https://twitter.com/grad_outcomes)  
LinkedIn: <https://www.linkedin.com/company/graduate-outcomes>

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