

## GMT interview

# The key information sets (KIS)

**Professor Janet Beer<sup>1</sup> explains the origins and implementation of the Key Information Sets. Professor Beer goes on to talk about why she has high hopes for its success and looks forward to continuing work to make it a responsive and reliable source of high quality information.**

The KIS, which became available to prospective students, their families and advisers on September 27th, has its origins in research which was commissioned by the Higher Education Funding Council and was published in 2010. The committee which I chair – the Higher Education Public Information Steering Group – has oversight of the information which is made publicly available in the higher education sector as well as the operation of the National Student Survey (NSS). It was our task to decide how to best use the findings of the research for the widest possible benefit of future students.

*‘Accessibility and visibility of information was the issue, not the provision of the data’*

The research, carried out by Oakleigh Consulting and Staffordshire University, engaged with more than 2000 prospective and current students from a wide variety of educational backgrounds. Also consulted were those organisations most intimately involved with higher education, including higher education institutions, further education colleges, careers advisers, employers and others. The most compelling reason for undertaking this research was to ascertain what prospective students were most interested in knowing about the university or college course they were applying for. In addition, my group was very keen to understand where prospective students wanted to see that information, who they trusted to provide it and how they envisaged using it when deciding on their course and their institution.

It was something of a surprise to discover that the majority of the pieces of information which students wanted to see were already in the public domain. The accessibility and visibility of those pieces of information

was therefore the issue, not the provision of the data. This fact helped to give comfort to many in the sector who were initially mistrustful of the value and verifiability of the kind of information that students<sup>12</sup> wanted to see. So, the KIS is now published on a new Unistats website (retaining the title from a previous incarnation) but they will also be accessed directly through a link on the individual course webpage of the university or college. The course based nature of the KIS will also allow prospective students and their advisers to make very easy and simple comparisons between the same courses at different institutions. The NSS was always intended to provide comparisons at a subject level and the use of the KIS will restore this primary purpose to the results of the survey.

*‘The KIS will be the first port of call for prospective students’*

When the Key Information Sets were being tested in an early incarnation one of the most often asked questions from users was about the reliability and truthfulness of the data. The provision of the information in one location, accessed directly at Unistats or through institutional websites, will not only simplify the process by which applicants get hold of information, it will also reassure them that it is reliable and easily comparable. This will significantly enhance their capacity to make informed decisions about where and what to study.

The KIS will be their first port of call. It will give them access to the information which was identified by the participants in the research, to which has been added the tuition fee – covering the areas of student satisfaction (derived from the NSS) and including a new question on the efficacy and impact of the student union, employment and salary data, learning, teaching and assessment methods, tuition fee and accommodation costs, and professional accreditation. Course by course this collection of information can then be compared with similar offerings at other institutions and used as a baseline from which to engage more profoundly through institutional websites

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with what lies beneath the headlines. Types of information on institutional websites will include the detail of the financial support available, the professional accreditation and the range of accommodation types and prices. The opportunity to investigate the structure of the course and whether it offers opportunities for placement learning, varied forms of assessment and learning styles will also be available.

***‘The advantage of the KIS is that the data is presented without comment – interpretation is up to the user’***

It was never intended that the KIS would replace the detailed information available at open days or other interactions with higher education providers but, always, that it would give a really good foundation for further research, especially for those students who do not have easy access to high quality careers or academic advice. The impenetrability of some of the websites where the data is currently located has, in the past, meant that prospective students were frustrated in their attempts to get a fully rounded picture of a programme of study; the KIS will go a long way to relieving those frustrations.

One of the developments that is likely to take place is that private providers of information will make use of the data. For example, website based organisations like the Student Room, and other more conventional providers of guides for consumers like Which?. Whilst organisations like these do a good job, the advantage for prospective students and their advisers of the KIS is that the data is presented without comment – interpretation is up to the user.

***‘Comparable data allows institutional staff the opportunity to look at work done by colleagues in other institutions’***

At every stage of the process that led up to the final development of the KIS the higher education sector was consulted and engaged in discussions about the format and the delivery of the information. Whilst it seems unlikely that careers advisers in universities will be called upon to engage in pre-undergraduate study advice and guidance, the comparative data now available through the KIS will provide academic and other staff the opportunity to look at the work being done by colleagues in other institutions in cognate discipline areas. Rather than having to rely on the somewhat blunt instrument of the league table, where the nuances of course provision in different institutions are not visible, academics will be able to see more detail about their peers and the way in which study is organised across their subject.

***‘Further user research will guarantee utility of information over the next few years’***

When institutions are visited by the Quality Assurance Agency as a part of the audit cycle which assures quality in British higher education, an important part of their consideration will be focussed on the provision of information and whether it is reaching and satisfying its intended audience. Expert working groups have been used during the development of the KIS to ensure that the language which defines and categorises the information satisfies the exacting requirements of the provider (the higher education institution), the auditor (the QAA) and the user. This does not mean, however, that the KIS is written in stone; we will conduct an early review of its effectiveness, looking at the experience of the user of the KIS itself, the institutional website link and Unistats as well as that of the higher education provider. Any immediate improvements which can be made in the first year of operation will be made but we envisage that a fuller scale review will be conducted in 2014 when we will have the opportunity to revisit the content of the KIS. The principle which has guided us throughout its development is that the pieces of information included in the KIS are those chosen as most useful to prospective students and their advisers by those very people. Their priorities may change over the next few years and so it is important to ensure that further research with the users is carried out to guarantee currency and utility of information.

***‘Prospective students wanted to know what the quality of the student unions was like’***

The KIS can be used in conjunction with the Student Charter, which most institutions now have, which is designed to ensure that the current students of an institution have access to the information they need in order to get the most from their higher education experience. The information must also be kept up to date by the university or college working closely with its student union. The only new question to have been introduced into the NSS since its introduction is as a direct result of the findings of the research that led to the development of the KIS and concerns the role of the student union.

Prospective students wanted to know what the quality of the union at their chosen higher education institution was like and we simply had no consistently applied means of determining this. So, for the first

time this year, individual student unions will be able to see how their members rate them. The real benefit of this will almost inevitably be a considerable effort by the National Union of Students, nationally and locally, to ensure that their members understand the role of the union and how that role has changed over the last few years. The focus has largely moved from entertainment and retail to representation and advocacy, and the new generation of students and their families and advisers need to understand this. The unions will have to work hard with their members to make sure that the student union understands the changing demands and requirement of the student body and, in turn, that engagement by the membership in the wide range of opportunities afforded by the union is likely to enrich both their student life and future career.

*'Direct comparability of postgraduate programmes is being investigated'*

It is possible that in the future a set of information for postgraduate students might be developed – something which would obviously have an impact on the work of higher education careers advisory services. A survey to gather current students' views about their postgraduate studies might be one means of providing information and work is currently being done to investigate whether such a proposition is viable. There are certain problems which will provide a fundamental challenge to the development of a nationwide survey for postgraduates, not least the smaller numbers of students on programmes leading to concerns about preservation of anonymity as well as the direct comparability of programmes across institutions. I look forward to the findings of the research with interest.

For more information about the KIS please go to: [www.hefce.ac.uk/whatwedo/lt/publicinfo/kis/](http://www.hefce.ac.uk/whatwedo/lt/publicinfo/kis/)