

## The Student Guide to Graduate Destination Data

### What this guide is for:

- To explain graduate destination data, how it is collected, and what it means
- To show what it can be used for, and what conclusions you can – and shouldn't – draw from it
- To explain where to find it and what to expect when you do
- To give you an idea of the questions you can ask if you - or an advisor working with you – encounter this information

### What is graduate destination data?

Destination data is information on the outcomes of qualifications – in this case, university degrees. This examines who took different qualifications, and what they did with them – did they go into work? What sort of job did they get? Were they studying a postgraduate qualification?

The UK runs an annual survey of graduate destinations, the Destinations of Leavers of Higher Education (or DLHE) Survey.

The survey has been running for over 50 years, and covers *everyone* originally from the EU and who receives any kind of qualification from all public universities, from one year diploma courses to doctorates.

Some parts of the survey response are used in websites such as Unistats that aim to help would-be students to make university choices, or used by other organisations in league tables or other careers materials – although the survey is much older than these sites, and contains much more information than is used in them.

### Why do we collect this kind of data?

Information from this survey is used to provide the data to try to answer questions in higher education, particularly those that involve graduate careers. There are some questions that the Government or other bodies want answers to every year – such as how many new university graduates got jobs last year? But we also know that other questions come up quite frequently – such as what jobs did graduates in different parts of the country, or from different backgrounds, get? This survey aims to make sure we have the information to answer those questions as and when they come up and to make sure we can see if particular groups need any kind of help and what sort of support that might be.

## How is this data collected?

Graduates are asked – usually by the Careers Service at their institution, although other parts of the university may also be involved - what they were doing six months after they graduated, where they are doing it, and why they were doing it.

All graduates from all public universities at all levels of qualification are surveyed in the winter after they left university. The universities themselves contact students by phone, email and post, and ask them what they were doing six months after they graduated, where they are doing it, and why they were doing it. Each university must make sure at least 80 per cent of their full time first degree graduates respond to the survey. Because of this high response rate, we get a lot of responses – last year it was over 400,000 – and so we can be confident that the results do we get give a good picture of what happened to graduates.

The responses are then collected by the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA). The information is used for research into graduate careers, for examining issues in graduate employment and in postgraduate study, and to examine a host of other social and economic questions. The information for first degree graduates is also used to create the data used in websites such as Unistats and to help commercial organisations compile league tables.

## Who uses the data?

Survey data goes automatically to those Government organisations that have a direct interest in graduates – the Department of Business, Innovation and Skills, the higher education funding bodies of England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland (HEFCE, SHEFC, HEFCW and DELNI), the Research Councils (responsible for research funding, and who are primarily interested in what happens to doctoral graduates), the NHS (for monitoring the training of healthcare workers that they fund) and the National College of Teaching and Leadership (who deal with teacher training).

Other organisations may access it or parts of the data for academic or careers research or for purposes such as websites on university choices or league table publications, but this data will be anonymised (all personal information removed) and other restrictions about how it can be used may also be put into place.

It *does not* go to the Student Loan Company, HMRC or any other organisation concerned with the individual finances of students or graduates. These organisations are able to access the information if they wish, but under the same restrictions as researchers. They can't use it to check your personal details.

## What does this information tell us? And what does it *not* tell us?

This is a survey designed to look at what happened to graduates 6 months after they left university, and so it is at its best when it's used to answer questions along those lines. It's very good for examining the wide range of options you might have with particular subjects when you leave university, or at getting an idea of the range of jobs that were available in particular parts of the country for people who had just qualified with a degree.

But there are some very important things to remember.

1. All survey data is biased in some way or another. Women are more likely to answer them than men, for example (as is the case for this data). But this survey has a very high response rate. It's very good data, and you can be confident it gives a good picture of the situation as it stood when the data was collected. But it's not entirely complete, and it's not perfect. No survey ever is.
2. It's a historic survey. By the time all that data is processed and checked, it is several months since it was originally collected. The jobs market for graduates doesn't always change much, but if you're choosing a course that means you'll leave university in three or four years, then remember that many of these figures can change quite a lot in that time. Different parts of the jobs market might have done better than others, for example, or there might have been a slump in another industry. So the data is useful, but don't rely on it to predict exactly how your subject will do in the future.
3. It is taken after six months. It's really good at finding out what happened on graduation, but not as good at working out what people will do for the rest of their lives. Just because someone is doing one thing does not mean they will always do that thing – that goes for people in well-paid jobs, or people who are not working at all. Some careers have very different trajectories as well. Some will start in quite junior roles and progress a lot as they get older. Some start quite high up the career ladder and peak early.
4. On a similar point, courses and whole universities change as well. They also look at and use this data themselves and if they see disappointing figures for their courses, they often make changes as a result. So don't assume that because a course at University A has a higher employment rate than a course at University B, University A's degree will be 'better' or that you'll definitely be more likely to get a job if you go there. Last year's graduates did, but it doesn't necessarily mean that you will.
5. Sample sizes matter, and the data is reported carefully to take that into account. Sometimes you'll see some courses – particularly very specialist ones – have no data reported. It's not because anyone is hiding anything, it's because not enough people take that course to make the statistics that come out particularly meaningful. Imagine

you had a course with 5 people on it (that might not sound many, but there are lots of specialist courses like that). Imagine if one person from that course was out of work after six months. One person out of work is not many people, but one in five immediately means that course has an unemployment rate nearly three times the national average. So we don't report small courses as we can't really make the data very helpful.

6. Many of the differences between courses and institutions have almost nothing to do with how 'good' those courses or institutions are. A very good example is regional salaries. If you look at salary data, then London institutions will tend to have much higher salaries than universities in the North West, say. Is this because those institutions are 'better' and so you're going to get a better job? No, it just shows that graduates who go to university in London are more likely to come from London in the first place, and more likely to go to London to work, where salaries are higher - but so is the cost of living. There are similar and more subtle effects due to the intake of people into courses.

### **A quick note about league tables and course comparisons**

If you've read what we've said above, you might start to think – but what about league tables? And you'd be right to think that. League tables are interesting, and have value to get you some idea of the relative prestige of universities, but the destination data is not specifically designed for use in league tables, and the compilers and funders of the data don't promote them.

Because courses and universities change over time, just because University X is above University Y using data from last year, doesn't mean they'll still be in the same positions by the time you come to look at the data yourself, and certainly doesn't mean they'll still be there when they leave – just as we wouldn't expect a sporting league table to stay the same for several years. University Y might offer a crucial lecturer from University X a job, or invest money into new facilities and move up the league tables – remember, universities themselves pay very close attention to their standing in these tables and often change the way that they do things to move themselves up in the tables.

And many of the differences between universities are because of location, or student intake, and not because one university is necessarily 'better' than the other one. Of course not all universities are the same, and some of those at the very top are amongst the very best universities in the world, but one of the big selling points of our system internationally is that many of our institutions are excellent, and to understand the real differences between them you need to look at what they teach and how they teach it rather than simply at the league tables. So look at league tables to get a general idea, but don't get too hung up about which

university is in 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> place. Next year, it'll probably be different universities there and the actual difference between the two could well only be down to the way the league table compiler chooses how to present the data.

## Where can you find this data being used?

The obvious place is [Unistats](#), where it appears in the form of the information on salary, the information on graduates going on to work or study, and the employment data. These three measures form part of a set of data about courses called the Key Information Set, or KIS, which is used widely on sites about university choices.

[HESA](#) itself has a [digest of the findings of the whole survey](#) if you want to look at a national picture and get a little more information about some of the data in the survey.

Universities feature KIS data when you visit course pages online, usually in the form of a red box at the bottom of course pages, or occasionally as a separate page, that includes various statistics about the course along with a link to Unistats. If you see 'KIS' as an option, this is where you'll find destination statistics.

The national publication, '[What Do Graduates Do?](#)', produced by the Association of Graduate Careers Advisory Services, (AGCAS, the body that looks after university careers services), and HECSU (the national careers research charity), provides a breakdown of the data for all the major subjects studied in the UK and gives a more complete picture of the jobs that are available. 'What Do Graduates Do?' is distributed free to all universities and sixth forms in the country.

[Which? University](#) uses KIS data when you look at subjects or courses to give you data on career prospects.

University league tables, such as the [Complete University Guide](#), and those produced by The Times (The Good University Guide), The Sunday Times or The Guardian, all use destination data in their measures of graduate prospects to give a view on how well graduates from these courses fare after graduation.

Destinations data is also used in many reviews and reports on higher education issues. The Government make regular use of it to inform the work of the Department of Business, Innovation and Skills and professional bodies and organisations use it to examine how the graduates that they oversee are faring. It is also used by other organisations both within and outside Government, to provide evidence to their reports and research - recent examples have included the work of the [Social Mobility and Child Poverty Commission](#) and the reports of the Royal Society of the Arts on the [economies of cities](#).

