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## Early Evaluation of Unistats User experiences

Report to the UK higher education funding bodies by the International  
Centre for Guidance Studies and the Careers Research and Advisory Centre

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## **Publication information**

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# **Executive summary**

This summary sets out the findings of this early evaluation of the Unistats website.

## **Introduction**

Unistats provides prospective students with information to support higher education (HE) choices. The site also has important secondary audiences in those who provide help, support, advice and guidance to prospective students. The site provides users with a useful and usable comparison site.

## **Unistats position in the market**

Unistats is not unique in its aim, but does offer a number of unique selling points linked to its position as the official and authoritative tool. This evaluation, backed up by other studies, has found that applicants, their parents/carers and advisers use online tools extensively as part of their decision-making about HE. Within our research, the most prominent and widely used sites in the HE information market are UCAS, Unistats and those provided by certain broadsheet newspapers which feature league tables. Brand recognition in the HE comparison market is not particularly strong, but Unistats was recognised by many users both during fieldwork and in the survey, as were some of its competitors.

User analytics data and our fieldwork demonstrate that there is awareness and usage of the Unistats site across all four nations of the UK, although predominantly in England (and across all its regions). However, 8% of visits were from outside the UK and the proportion of non-UK usage grew across the period of the evaluation (October – December 2012).

The trends in site use to date show a lower level of use (around half) at weekends than during weekdays. This would be consistent with a substantial proportion of use by professionals or employees during their working day (whereas other potential users might be able and expected to use the site more uniformly over the week). We infer that a substantial proportion of usage to date has been by careers professionals, others in advisory roles and HE staff, but expect that this balance will change with increasing maturity of the site.

Web analytics reveal that most users to date have come to the site directly by typing in the URL (73%), rather than following a link from another website ('referrals', 10%) or from a search engine (18%). Of those using a search engine, the majority (over 60%) searched for the term "Unistats". This direct approach to the site is likely to have resulted from the early promotion of the site, and this situation is expected to change with maturity of the site. At this early stage, most (68%) referrals to the site have been from the 'KIS widgets' on HE providers' sites. However, during user testing, some concerns were raised about the visibility and usability of the widgets.

### **How do people respond to the site?**

In general participants in the research were positive about Unistats and understood its purpose. The main user groups (prospective students, parents/carers and teachers and careers advisers) all understood the value of a comparison site for HE and felt that Unistats delivered an effective and useful tool.

In general the end-users (prospective students, current students and parents) were more positive about the site than professional users (careers advisers, teachers and HE staff) and more likely to describe the site as ‘useful’ and ‘easy to get around’.

While opinions about the colour, design and feel of the site differed, the majority of users were broadly happy with the way that the site appeared. However, some users (particularly young people) felt that the site design was too stark and would have welcomed the addition of more pictures, other visual images and ‘human’ content.

Many users felt that the independent and authoritative nature of the site was one of its key strengths, although some users revealed uncertainty about the branding of the site. In particular some were unable to identify the owner of the site or ascertain its level of authority, reliability/trustworthiness or completeness of coverage (all particular assets of the site). Furthermore there was some confusion about where the site would fit into the process of educational choice-making and how it might relate to application procedures (UCAS).

### **How do people use the site?**

Respondents to the survey reported using websites supporting HE choices in a variety of locations and contexts. Over 80% of end-users (i.e. prospective applicants, students and parents) reported that they used them at home individually, and around one third of prospective applicants at home with a parent/carer. Around 60% used them at school or college (around half of these in a group setting). A significant minority (16%) said they would access such websites whilst on the move.

All of these groups of survey respondents reported that they used either a desktop or laptop computer to access HE choice websites, but up to a fifth also reported that they would do so from a smartphone (and about 1 in 10, a tablet). Furthermore, user analytics reveal that the site is being used from a wide variety of different operating systems, browsers and devices, with 11% of actual usage from smartphones and tablets already. Some users who were observed during the fieldwork using alternative devices found the site more difficult to use than those using PCs.

The analytics data show that use of the site to date has been substantial, with the average length of visit over eight minutes (which is long in comparison with the use of many websites). Analysis of user behaviour suggests that 38% of visits involve use of the search function on the site, and most of these more than once. Of these in-site searches, 16 of the 100 most commonly searched terms have been HE providers (compared with 73% course subjects); we can infer that numerically over 10% of all searches are for institutions. This pattern of behaviour is significant as the current search functionality does not produce results for institutions or locations (or information other than course titles).

### **Navigating the site, searching, filtering and comparing**

User testing reveals a strong reliance by users on search as the key way of accessing

information on the site. However, the value of search as a strategy for interrogating the site was undermined by a number of issues:

- While the search worked relatively well for courses, it is flawed if a user searches for anything else e.g. an institution or location
- The search requires a high level of accuracy from the user and is poor at correcting common spelling mistakes or using semantic logic to substitute alternative terms e.g. substituting plant science for botany
- There are issues with the ordering of search results which can produce unexpected ordering of results and can sometimes advantage particular institutions
- The rendering of search results frequently results in an excessive number of results that it is difficult for the user to parse.

Users also identified a number of problems with the menus. These issues were clearest in relation to the use of the ‘Courses’ menu which users identified as unintuitive. There were also some issues relating to the ‘Universities & colleges’ menu.

Users reported that the site does not provide sufficiently strong or relevant tools for them to filter results down into lists that can practically be used for comparison and decision-making. One area that was particularly identified was the ability to search and filter using geographical information – especially relating to proximity to ‘home’. Many participants in the fieldwork started their searches by looking for local institutions that they had an awareness of. This was particularly true for students from Scotland, Northern Ireland and Wales. Although filters already exist for countries, some students found these insufficient for their needs as they were interested in the relative proximity to ‘home’. The other information by which many sought to filter was course entry requirements (whether articulated as UCAS tariff, grades of recent entrants or current requirements).

Most users liked the comparison feature on the site and found it easy to use and to compare courses. Some participants reported some challenges in using the comparison feature e.g. in removing selected courses from their shortlist. However, in general, the device of showing courses side by side was seen as effective.

### **Data issues**

Users generally found that the site provided them with a large amount of information to support their decision-making, with varying degrees of usefulness. Most end-users found the type of information that was provided by the site useful. Most of the suggestions for additional information were from advisers seeking detail, rather than end-users. User testing revealed some concerns amongst participants about the sheer quantity of data that they were being asked to parse. There was a strong desire for more guidance on which data were likely to be important.

Participants in the groups and survey respondents were most interested in data focusing on entry requirements, the quality of the student experience and graduate employability. The issues that prospective applicants, parents and current students in our online survey rated most important when considering HE applications were course content, entry qualifications/tariff and student satisfaction, followed by employment destination information.

The most important issues that the advisers recommended correlated very well with this, albeit with greater attention to career destinations and less to student satisfaction.

There were some concerns about the way in which data were presented. Some users felt that this was confusing and were particularly confused by statistical caveats that were displayed around the data. Users were particularly unsure about how to deal with missing data or entries where two sets of data were presented.

The main area in which users reported that they would like additional data was in the area of contextual information. Unistats assumes that users are interested in the comparison of course information, whereas many educational choices are made by taking into account a wider range of factors. These include information about the nature of the course itself, contextual information about the institution within which the course is offered, including about the location of the institution and wider aspects of the student experience. The degree to which contextual information might be added to Unistats will to some extent relate to the strategic ambition for the site, i.e. whether it aims to occupy a unique role with high volumes of traffic, in which case use of contextual information may also aid attractiveness and could be an important asset.

We found almost no enthusiasm at all amongst any user group in relation to providing more information about institutions' costs (i.e. how they allocate expenditure).

## **Key decisions**

The following six issues are key decisions that the UK HE funding bodies and the site's stakeholders should consider in the future development of the site. These issues were either directly raised by the users or identified through analysis of user behaviour by the researchers. However, they were judged to require strategic decisions by the site's owners rather than simple recommendations. It is anticipated that the UK HE funding bodies may wish to make a formal response on these key decisions.

### **Key decision 1: Is a Unistats site required?**

The evidence suggests that the Unistats site has been well received and it is possible to construct a strong argument for the maintenance of an official government-funded source of information for potential HE students and those who support their choices. However, the maintenance and development of such a site can be costly and time-consuming. An alternative approach would be for the government to simply open up the Key Information Set (KIS) data to a range of commercial providers and allow them to provide the data to end-users. Indeed this is already happening with some of Unistats main competitors making use of the KIS data. It is suggested that HEFCE and the other funding councils consider the costs and value of continuing to support its own comparison site and balances this against the needs of the end-user and the challenges of quality-assuring sites that are offered by commercial providers.

### **Key decision 2: Non-UK traffic/Internationalising the site**

The site is currently receiving around 10% of visits from users outside the UK. Given the importance of international students to UK higher education, further thought needs to be given to whether this user group is a priority. If non-UK prospective students are seen as a priority a study should be commissioned to examine how the Unistats site could be developed most effectively to support such international users.

### **Key decision 3: Prioritising the Unistats brand**

The site includes, to some extent, two competing brands: Unistats and KIS. Some users found this confusing. In general, users were also able to identify Unistats as the main or stronger brand. It is therefore suggested that further thought should be given as to whether it is necessary to maintain these two brands or whether it would be advantageous to phase out one of the brands (most likely KIS) on the website and widget. If Unistats is chosen as the main brand, some public relations work could help potential audiences in associating it with its unique position of being 'official', and hence both authoritative and fully inclusive.

#### **Key decision 4: Entry requirements/Qualifications of previous entrants**

Users expressed a strong desire to search and filter by course entry requirements. It is recommended that this is used as part of the redevelopment of the Search and Filter functions. However, it is recognised that there are both technical and political challenges in utilising entry requirements. An alternative solution might be allowing users to search by the qualifications of previous entrants. These data are currently available on the site.

It is suggested that further thought be given as to whether users should be allowed to search by either entry requirements or qualifications of previous entrants and what mechanism might be used to aggregate the diverse range of entry qualifications into searchable data. One option would clearly be to use the current UCAS tariff system, which is quite widely understood by users. However, there could also be alternative mechanisms which could be used. Careful thought should also be given as to how these data are presented to make it clear that the data may not correspond to either current entry requirements or the full range of what HE providers will accept.

#### **Key decision 5: Reliability of data**

The site has a high quality threshold for the inclusion of data that leaves some courses with missing data. This is a particular issue for colleges offering courses with relatively modest student enrolments.

Some users reported that this missing data, especially when combined with other statistical caveats and information, undermined their confidence in the comprehensive coverage and usefulness of the site. For others it led to specific concerns about the courses that had missing or caveated data.

It may therefore be desirable to review the thresholds required for course data and how these are most effectively communicated to a range of different users. This is particularly important to ensure a level playing field in the HE market as these issues tend to impact particularly strongly on certain types of institutions (typically smaller and newer HE providers). Consequently, there may be a case for adjusting the data quality threshold.

### **Key decision 6: The inclusion of contextual and qualitative data**

Unistats was designed as a data-rich site providing quantitative information which can be compared. While many users related positively to this quantitative focus, there were some concerns that it did not provide sufficient information for decision-making. Many users stressed the importance of qualitative and contextual information as a key part of their decision, as well as its role in making the site attractive to them. Broadly this can be broken down into four areas which should be considered in the future development of the site.

- Course information e.g. course descriptions and module lists
- Institutional information e.g. pictures of the campus, information about the history and culture of the institution
- Information about the community within which the course is located e.g. whether urban or rural, provision of facilities aimed at students etc
- Information about the wider student experience e.g. whether students enjoy aspects of their experience beyond the course, which activities they pursue etc.

## **Recommendations**

The following 23 recommendations were identified through the research and have been drawn out to inform the future development of the site. None of these recommendations has major strategic implications for the future of the site in the way that the key decisions do. However, how far and how fast the site's owners are able to address these is likely to depend on resources and other constraints.

**Recommendation 1: Purpose and value of the site.** Overall, participants in the research understood the rationale for the Unistats site and were positive about its purpose and implementation. It is recommended that the Unistats site continues to be supported and that the original rationale is maintained in guiding future development.

**Recommendation 2: The Welsh language site.** Overall, the Welsh language site was well received by Welsh speakers. However, some users articulated a desire for a greater level of information relating to the availability of teaching in Welsh (at the course level) and information about course fees and funding in Wales. It is suggested that HEFCW and its strategic partners consider the development of both sites in the light of these findings.

**Recommendation 3: Further evaluation.** This formative evaluation has identified a wide range of issues that should be addressed as the site evolves. Evaluation at this early stage has been worthwhile and hopefully the recommendations can support the ongoing development of the site. However, evaluation at such an early stage after launch prevents the research team drawing many conclusions about the site's market penetration or impact. It is suggested that a second evaluation is commissioned after the site has been available for a full academic cycle to address these issues and to identify any further issues that have emerged.

**Recommendation 4: Site promotion and search engine optimisation (SEO).** We assume that there is an aspiration to increase traffic and penetration of the site amongst its target markets. To achieve this will require continued promotional efforts, although not to the extent undertaken at launch. Current user analytics reveal that the site is highly dependent on brand awareness for traffic. It is suggested that resources are invested in SEO in order to attract a more general audience to the site (i.e. the site is prominent in results of a range of typical searches for information about HE and choosing courses more generally).

**Recommendation 5: Social media strategy.** Social media currently account for very few referrals to the site. Furthermore the site does not facilitate the sharing of information via social media. It is suggested that a Unistats social media strategy is developed to enhance the site's visibility within and integration with social media.

**Recommendation 6: Partnership building.** The site has to date received little traffic from referring sites. This research suggests that users are frequently looking to UCAS and newspaper websites for their information about HE and so these sites should be important targets for cross-linking. In particular, users would like to see the site more strongly inter-linked with the UCAS site to facilitate moving between the two sites. The research team's experience of evaluating other sites also suggests that there is potential traffic to be gained through building links with local authorities and schools through their learning and careers portals, and virtual learning environments.

**Recommendation 7: Widget.** The widget is a powerful tool in attracting traffic to the site. However the design of the widget could be improved as many users did not spot it, perceived it as spam/advertising or ignored it altogether. Furthermore there are two links from the widget: ‘Compare this course’ which links to the course details within the Unistats site and ‘KIS’ which links to the main HEFCE site. Many participants found the two links confusing and were lost once they arrived on the HEFCE site. It is therefore suggested that the widget is redesigned to simplify its use and that links should lead directly to course information on the Unistats site.

**Recommendation 8: About the site/Find out more.** As some users (parents and prospective applicants) were unsure about the nature and ownership of the site, there would be value in developing the ‘Find out more’ section of the site, including ‘About Unistats’, to more clearly explain the brand and heritage of the site to the lay user, and to provide more general ideas about when and how best to use it as part of educational and career decision-making (in addition to the current focus on detailed data issues).

**Recommendation 9: Branding.** Most users were able to describe the site as providing an HE comparison service. Some users were also able to articulate the Unistats brand as being authoritative. However, the branding would benefit from further articulation, in particular stressing that the site is impartial, government-owned and based on high quality data (and incorporates data from all HE providers rather than selectively).

**Recommendation 10: Glossary.** Some users reported being confused by some of the abbreviations and jargon used on the site e.g. MSc, KIS, National Student Survey. The creation of a dynamic glossary would help to alleviate this. This would build effectively on the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) (2012) recommendation around qualification aim.

**Recommendation 11: Mobile optimisation.** There is a substantial minority of users accessing the site from mobile phones and other devices. It is therefore suggested that the possibility of optimising the site for the mobile web or the creation of mobile apps is explored.

**Recommendation 12: Usability and technical issues.** The research team have identified a number of minor usability and technical issues through the course of the research. A full list of these will be passed to HEFCE and their design team to address.

**Recommendation 13: Search.** The Search function on the site works well provided the user enters a term that appears within formal course titles. However, there is a need to review the operation of the Search tool, particularly to ensure that it is capable of recognising institutions and locations, as well as course titles and reference numbers. There is also a need to ensure that the search is able to deal with alternative versions of course titles (and common misspellings) and to understand the underlying semantics of different courses. This recommendation builds on the HESA (2012) recommendations for increasing the range of search fields.

**Recommendation 14: Rendering of search results.** Unistats frequently returns a large number of results (often many hundreds) from a search or menu selection. This regularly comprises 20 or more pages of results, in many cases with large numbers of courses from the same institution appearing. It is suggested that strategies are explored to improve the rendering of results to allow more effective comparison, e.g. presenting the institutions

where courses are located and then offering users the option to drill down into the courses that are available from the institutions they select.

**Recommendation 15: Navigation structures.** The current homepage presents users with two menu structures for navigating the site ('Courses' and 'Universities & colleges'). As more participants in the research used the Search function than these menus, and this pattern is also observed in user analytics, it is suggested that the Search and Advanced Search functions should be made more prominent, the search functionality enhanced, and the prominence of the menus potentially reduced on the home page.

**Recommendation 16: The 'Universities & colleges' menu.** It is recommended that both the information accessed via the 'Universities & colleges' menu and its presentation should be reviewed to make the range of courses available at an institution more clear. The nature of institutional information offered, for example a map showing its administrative offices, might be reconsidered so as to be more relevant to potential applicants. This might also be an opportunity to introduce some visual content as requested by some observed users.

**Recommendation 17: The 'Courses' menu.** The 'Courses' menu currently relies on knowledge of Joint Academic Coding System (JACS) codes. Not all courses within the JACS taxonomy are located in the most intuitive place and so a 'look-up' table or other supporting device would be useful. For example, user analytics reveal that the most common search is for 'Psychology': few users are aware that they would need to select Biological Sciences in the menu to find it.

**Recommendation 18: Filtering options.** Many users failed to find or use the available filters, or could not filter using the type of information they wanted to. It is therefore suggested that the filtering capability is made more prominent and redeveloped so as to include more of the key issues users identify as important within the evaluation.

**Recommendation 19: Search and filter by location.** Users expressed a strong desire to search and filter by the geographical location of an institution/course and its proximity to their home. It is therefore suggested that geographical data is used in the redevelopment of the search and filter functions. This recommendation aligns with the recommendation on location made by HESA (2012).

**Recommendation 20: Rendering of data.** A number of participants expressed concerns about being overwhelmed by data. The data tables presented to aid comparison are frequently long and complex. It is therefore recommended that a smaller range of data is routinely presented (i.e. grouped under headings) but that users are able to drill down into these data to obtain more specific data where they seek it.

**Recommendation 21: Additional data.** There was no strong desire from participants for additional data to be provided: in general they were concerned about being overwhelmed by data rather than demanding more. However, a small minority of participants expressed interest in data on drop-out/retention rates and the ratio of applications to acceptances, as well as more prominence for entry requirements (UCAS tariffs or similar). It may be worth considering the practicality of such additions in further development of the site.

**Recommendation 22: Better integration between institutional and course information.** Currently the course information and institutional information are not well integrated.

Participants in the research were generally interested in the institutional context for courses. It is therefore recommended that the site should present course and institutional information in a more related format, and that integration between these two forms of information be improved.

**Recommendation 23: Statistical caveats.** The site uses a range of icons, roll-over text and other tools to explain the reliability of data and to provide information about the statistics behind the data. Some users found the presence of the caveats and other statistical information difficult to understand. In some cases this led them to express concerns about the usefulness of the data altogether. There would be value in experimenting with some alternative approaches to presenting the data and conducting focused usability testing to explore this issue further.

## Introduction

This publication sets out the findings and recommendations of the early evaluation of the Unistats website by iCeGS and CRAC. Recommendations have been suggested which could enhance the current conception of the site. Where more substantive issues have been identified these have been described under the heading 'Key decisions' and it is suggested that the UK HE funding bodies deliberate further on these in consultation with appropriate stakeholders.

## Background

Providing information about HE courses has been seen as an important part of the quality assurance of HE since at least 2001 (HEFCE et al., 2010). At this point the sector's representative bodies (Universities UK and GuildHE), the Quality Assurance Agency for HE (QAA) and HEFCE agreed to develop a specification for a new set of published information about quality and standards. Its purpose was to enable prospective students and their advisers to make informed decisions, to inform the judgements of other stakeholders, and to secure accountability for the use of public funds.

This information set has been reviewed and revised over the years (HEFCE, 2002; 2003 and 2006). The data have been collected centrally and published on the Unistats website. In 2008-09, consideration of public information formed part of several reviews of learning, teaching and quality assurance (National Student Forum, 2008; National Union of Students (NUS), 2008; HEFCE, 2009) and was also investigated by the House of Commons Select Committee for Innovation, Universities, Science and Skills (2009). The findings of these bodies spurred on a review of information provision that ultimately resulted in the development of the Key Information Set (KIS) by the HE funding councils. Work on developing the KIS commenced in 2010 for delivery in 2012.

These developments and deliberations on the provision of information about HE were picked up in the 2011 HE white paper *Students at the Heart of the System* (Department for Business, Innovation & Skills (BIS), 2011), in which a central theme was the need for institutions to provide information in an accessible, comprehensive and comparable way. The intention of doing so was to empower prospective students to make informed choices about HE. The white paper specifically committed to creating a KIS of comparable information about courses and continuing to publish information on the original Unistats website, including student satisfaction ratings, and improving its presentation. The four UK HE funding councils jointly fund the Unistats website which includes the KIS. The Unistats site was then re-launched in late September 2012 as a mechanism for delivering high quality information to users and potential users of HE.

Unistats and the KIS fit well with broader policy initiatives to open up access to government data. The establishment of data.gov.uk is one part of this initiative that seeks to make data available to developers and other technical specialists. Originally, the design for the Unistats site was conceived as being part of this new initiative and the look and feel of the site was shaped by the involvement of the Government Digital Service (part of the Cabinet Office). Although as the Unistats site went live earlier than gov.uk it does not necessarily echo the current look of that site.

Unistats is therefore about extending this openness to the end-users of HE and providing high quality information that can underpin the HE market. David Willetts (Minister for

Universities and Science) has argued that this opening up of HE data and enabling comparisons between institutions is a key part of the government's HE reforms and that this is 'unquestionably a force for good' (Willets, 2012). It is important therefore to recognise that the government is committed to ensuring access to high quality information and not to the maintenance of Unistats as such. A key question for this research is therefore how far Unistats does enable users to access high quality HE information.

The Unistats website was launched in a timely way during a period of considerable change in the HE system. A key element of these changes was the decision to allow HE providers to increased tuition fees. The policy rationale for this decision was to shift costs from the state to the individual and to increase the role of the market in HE. However, consumer decisions and awareness of product are key to the establishment of an effective market. Unistats therefore speaks directly to this policy concern by providing consumers of HE with information about the HE market that can inform and underpin rational choice-making.

Another important context within which Unistats has been launched is the loss of much of the infrastructure that previously supported career and educational decision-making (Hooley and Watts, 2011; Watts, 2012; House of Commons Education Committee, 2013). Shifts in policy have removed several agencies that previously operated in this space (Connexions, Aimhigher and the Educational Business Partnerships) and relocated responsibility directly with schools through the Education Act 2011 and with HE providers monitored by the Office for Fair Access. How successful this policy will be remains to be seen and it is not the main focus of this evaluation. However, it is possible to argue that while providing access to high quality information cannot replace careers education and guidance its importance becomes even greater when the future of such activities is in doubt. Sites like Unistats which provide information that supports educational and career decisions are therefore critical both to end-users, who may lack sources of support, and to careers helpers, for whom they provide a resource base to support the giving of help.

## Conception and design

Unistats aims to empower prospective students to make informed choices about application to HE. The site also has important secondary audiences in those who provide help, support, advice and guidance to prospective students in their decisions about HE. This includes both helpers drawn from the students' own social and familial networks (parents and friends), their teachers (who will have varying levels of expertise about the current HE system and market) and professional helpers (careers advisers and HE outreach professionals) who may use a tool like Unistats to supplement their own professional knowledge. The current evaluation has engaged with all of these different audiences in evaluating the site.

The site is based on the KIS and draws on a range of other research and development work by HEFCE and other stakeholders (e.g. Oakleigh Consulting and Staffordshire University, 2010; HEFCE, 2012). The KIS is a comparable set of information about full or part-time undergraduate courses, designed to meet the information needs of prospective students.<sup>2</sup> The KIS contains 17 items which are drawn from pre-existing data collected through the National Student Survey (NSS), UCAS and Destinations of Leavers of Higher Education

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<sup>2</sup> For further information about the KIS see the HEFCE website at <http://www.hefce.ac.uk/whatwedo/ltpublicinfo/kis/>.

(DLHE) survey as well as new information provided directly by HE providers. Usability testing was used extensively in the site's development and the formative evaluation presented here was designed to build on this user-focused approach following the launch of the site.

Unistats presents HE information in the form of a comparison site. The site allows users to search for and identify courses that meet their requirements, to shortlist courses that interest them and then to use the KIS data to directly compare these courses. The functionality of the site is designed to be familiar to users who have used other online comparison sites to investigate insurance, holidays, mortgages or other consumer issues.

## The evaluation approach

This evaluation was designed as a formative evaluation. The research took place in the three months immediately after launch and comprised a number of inter-linked elements:

- Fieldwork observation of groups of users
- An online survey
- Web statistics analysis.

The fieldwork observation consisted of watching groups of users access the site. Users were given a workbook to work through and asked to record issues and concerns with the tasks that they completed. They were observed while undertaking these tasks and then asked to discuss their experience in a group debrief. In total, 294 users participated in the fieldwork stage of the research which was conducted over 22 sites. These users included the full range of potential Unistats users i.e. prospective students, current students, parents, teachers, careers advisers and HE outreach workers. (See Appendix 1 for further information on participants.)

The fieldwork formed the core of the research, but was supplemented with an online survey and analysis of web statistics. The online survey (available in English or Welsh) was conducted to provide information from a wider range of respondents than could be reached through the observed group fieldwork. This also afforded some prospect of assessing levels of awareness and penetration of the site into its potential audiences, although it was recognised that undertaking this work immediately after extensive launch promotions could limit the long-term representativeness of such findings. The survey received a total of 619 responses.

The project also analysed Unistats usage data. This provided an overview for the cumulative period of the website's life since re-launch (from 27 September 2012 to 9 January 2013) and also the opportunity to probe more deeply into some specific issues including search behaviour and the use of certain filters and information.

Further detail is provided on the methodology in the Appendix.

## **Overall findings**

Overall, the evaluators found that the site provides users with a useful and usable comparison site which can support their HE decision-making. The following quotes illustrate how the site's purpose was understood and articulated by users and how far they felt that the site met this purpose.

*It does the comparison for me instead of me going to each site on the rank tables, writing down information and then comparing.*

**Sixth Form Student**

*Useful facts and figures. Well summarised and presented. Important data has been considered and well presented.*

**Parent**

*Very user friendly. There is a lot of information collected. The type of information available is useful and relevant. It is very interesting to be able to compare courses that have similar names.*

**Careers Adviser**

*Comparing different courses – excellent facility making it easy to compare each course and establishment at the touch of a button.*

**Careers Adviser**

Within the online survey, 87% of respondents who had used the site identified that its purpose was to undertake comparisons between courses. This was similar for both end-users (prospective students and parents/carers) and professionals (careers advisers and school/college teachers).

The findings of this evaluation should therefore be viewed as an overall endorsement of the site and of its rationale. Participants understood the concept of a comparison site for HE and responded well to the way that this concept had been actualised in the Unistats site.

**Recommendation 1: Purpose and value of the site.** Overall, participants in the research understood the rationale for the Unistats site and were positive about its purpose and implementation. It is recommended that the Unistats site continues to be supported and that the original rationale is maintained in guiding future development.

Welsh-speaking users liked the Welsh Language version of the site and generally found it easy to identify and access. However, some users were surprised that all course names were listed in English which made the site feel less convincingly Welsh. However, given that much information is entered by HE providers themselves, it is difficult to address this without considerable central investment in Welsh language translation. Concerns relating to the Welsh site were also articulated about the way in which the site focused on funding information for England and the fact that information about Welsh teaching was not given at course level. However, it is important to recognise that these concerns were raised by a small number of participants.

**Recommendation 2: The Welsh language site.** Overall, the Welsh language site was well received by Welsh speakers. However, some users articulated a desire for a greater level of information relating to the availability of teaching in Welsh (at the course level) and information about course fees and funding in Wales. It is suggested that HEFCW and its strategic partners consider the development of both sites in the light of these findings.

However, within this broadly positive finding, further recommendations are offered which suggest developments that could be made to enhance the usability and impact of the site. Inevitably, the kind of formative evaluation presented here tends to focus on the areas that were identified as needing improvement or further development. However, the identification of areas for development should not be allowed to distract from the broad endorsement that the evaluators found for the product and concept.

The current evaluation has been clearly conceived as formative and was conducted in the first three months after the re-launch of the Unistats site. Given this timescale it is too early to be able to say very much about the site's impact. While web statistics demonstrate that the site is being used, it will be easier to identify patterns in this usage once the site has been through a full academic cycle. Similarly the dissemination of the site and the brand is still underway and so it will only be possible to identify how successful the marketing has been in relation to its visibility and use amongst all its potential audiences once a full academic cycle has been completed. It is therefore suggested that a further evaluation is commissioned following a complete academic cycle and that while this evaluation should retain a formative focus it is also tasked with examining issues around market penetration and impact.

**Recommendation 3: Further evaluation.** This formative evaluation has identified a wide range of issues that should be addressed as the site evolves. Evaluation at this early stage has been worthwhile and hopefully the recommendations can support the ongoing development of the site. However, evaluation at such an early stage after launch prevents the research team drawing many conclusions about the site's market penetration or impact. It is suggested that a second evaluation is commissioned after the site has been available for a full academic cycle to address these issues and to identify any further issues that have emerged.

#### **Key decision 1: Is a Unistats site required?**

The evidence suggests that the Unistats site has been well received and it is possible to construct a strong argument for the maintenance of an official government-funded source of information for potential HE students and those who support their choices. However, the maintenance and development of such a site can be costly and time-consuming. An alternative approach would be for the government to simply open up the KIS data to a range of commercial providers and allow them to provide the data to end-users. Indeed this is already happening with some of Unistats main competitors making use of the KIS data. It is suggested that HEFCE and the other funding councils consider the costs and value of continuing to support its own comparison site and balances this against the needs of the end-user and the challenges of quality-assuring sites that are offered by commercial providers.

## Unistats' position in the market

### The online market in higher education information

Unistats was launched into an established market of online careers support products including sites that support both broader educational decision-making and decisions about HE (Hooley et al., 2010a & b). Unistats is not unique in its aim but does offer a number of unique selling points, largely linked to its position as the official and authoritative tool. The site is also the only bilingual HE information site, offering comprehensive information in Welsh as well as English.

In addition to Unistats there are a number of university comparison sites (e.g. Which? University, Whatuni, Push, Compare the Uni and Bestcourse4me). Beyond these direct competitors there are a number of sites which provide alternative mechanisms for comparison between courses and institutions through the provision of institutional or departmental rankings (e.g. newspaper league tables), information about course content and entry requirements (e.g. UCAS) or the provision of student feedback (e.g. The Student Room). There are also many other sites that provide further information about HE and HE choices in the context of broader career building (e.g. Bright Links, icould, the National Careers Service) and others that provide information about other post-18 choices (Not Going to Uni, National Apprenticeships Service). Unistats is therefore operating in a relatively crowded careers information market and, to be successful, needs to offer a product that is distinctive, well-marketed and usable.

This evaluation, backed up by other studies, has found that applicants, their parents/carers and advisers use online tools extensively as part of their decision-making about HE (e.g. Briggs & Wilson, 2007; Oakleigh Consulting & Staffordshire University, 2010; Simões & Soares, 2010). This research found that the most prominent and widely used sites in the HE information market are currently UCAS, Unistats and those provided by certain broadsheet newspapers which feature league tables (see Table 1). While some fieldwork participants reported an awareness of both Unistats (prior to its re-launch and/or the new site) and its direct competitors, participants in the survey did not identify any of Unistats' direct competitors as having a higher level of brand recognition.

However, since this study was conducted directly after a period of extensive launch promotion, a further evaluation amongst potential users at a more 'mature' point in the site's life would provide a more representative view of its longer-term market position and penetration. In order to maximise survey responses within the time available, some participants were drawn to the survey directly as a result of using the Unistats site and were therefore not representative of all potential users.

**Table 1: Awareness and use of key HE-related websites while considering HE choices (only most popular shown, listed in order of awareness; N=454)**

	<i>Used site (%)</i>	<i>Heard of but not used (%)</i>	<i>Not aware of site (%)</i>
<b>UCAS course search</b>	70	16	14
<b>Unistats</b>	59	15	26
<b>Newspaper websites (e.g. Sunday Times)</b>	55	18	27
<b>Which? University</b>	34	25	41
<b>National Careers Service</b>	31	23	46
<b>CompleteUniversityGuide</b>	27	25	48
<b>Whatuni</b>	23	19	58
<b>Push</b>	19	21	60
<b>Bestcourse4me</b>	14	25	61

## **Who is using the site?**

Analysis of the web statistics and our fieldwork demonstrate that there is both awareness and usage of the Unistats site across all four nations of the UK, although predominantly in England and across all its regions (see Table 2). However, 8% of visits during the three months after launch were from outside the UK with the level of visits growing across the period. Given this, consideration might be afforded to whether any different information or links should be targeted or offered to such users.

**Table 2: Domicile of Unistats website users (based on Google Analytics data for number of visits, launch to 9 January 2013 inclusive)**

	<i>Thousands of visits</i>	<i>% of visits</i>
<b>England</b>	<b>171</b>	<b>83.6</b>
<b>N Ireland</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>1.7</b>
<b>Scotland</b>	<b>8</b>	<b>3.9</b>
<b>Wales</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>2.7</b>
<b>Other</b>	<b>16</b>	<b>8.1</b>

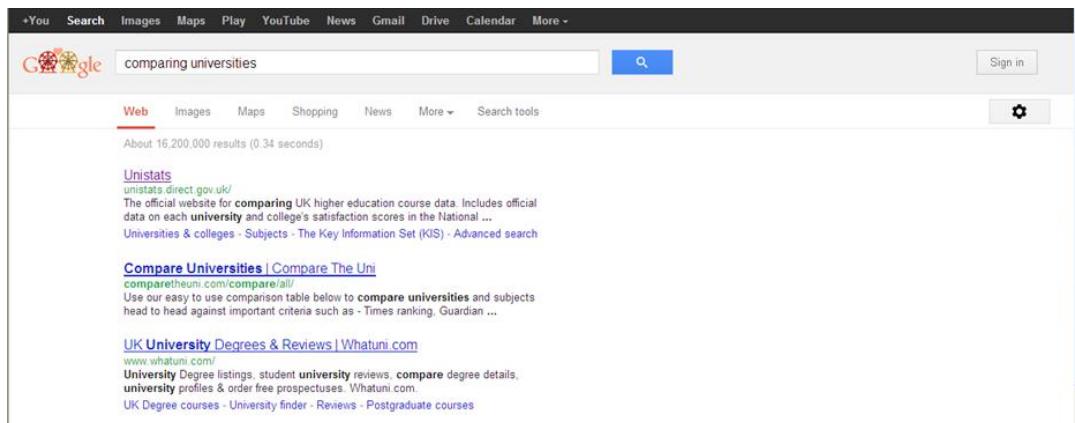
The trends in site use, based on web analytics data, show a distinctive ‘sawtooth’ pattern, with a much lower level of use (around half) at weekends than during weekdays. This would be consistent with a substantial proportion of use by professionals or employees during their working day (whereas other potential users might be able and expected to use the site more uniformly across the week). We infer that a substantial proportion of usage to date has been by careers professionals, others in advisory roles and HE staff. This is to be expected in the first few months of life of the site, with much promotional effort directed to these professionals. Once the site is mature and references to it have been embedded within advisers’ activities and the wider online career support environment, the balance is likely to shift towards a higher proportion of end-users (prospective applicants and parents/carers).

Web analytics reveal that most users to date have come to the site directly by typing in the URL (73%), rather than following a link from another website ('referrals', 10%) or from a search engine (18%). Of those using a search engine, the majority (over 60%) searched for the term 'Unistats'. This direct approach to the site is likely to have resulted from the early promotion of the site, and this situation is expected to change with maturity of the site.

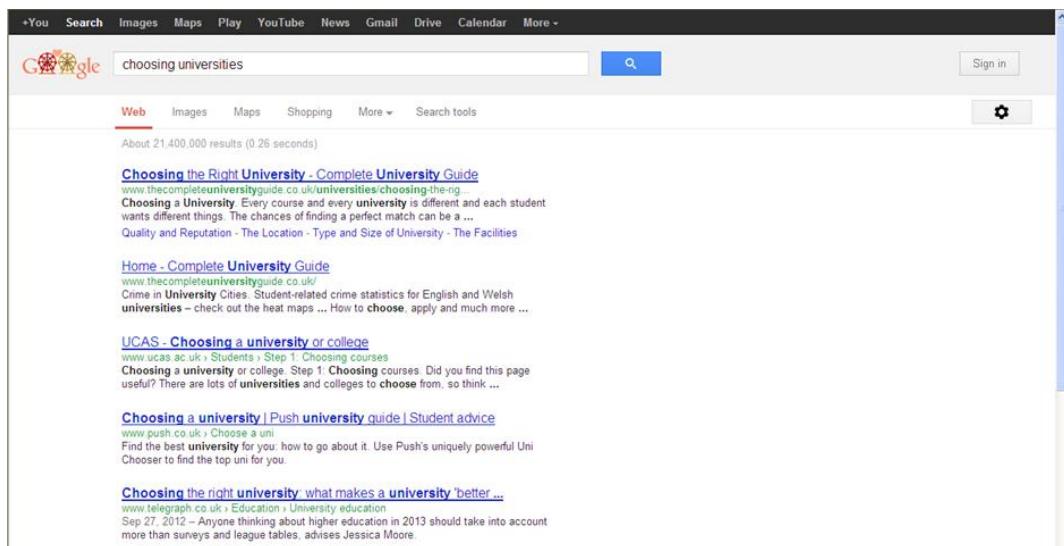
At the time of writing this report, Unistats is returned as the top result in a search for 'comparing universities' or 'comparing university courses' using Google. However, it is not returned as a prominent result (i.e. not in the first few pages of results) for alternative search terms, even where they are quite similar such as 'choosing universities' or 'choosing a university course'. (See Figures 1 and 2.)

While this does to some extent reflect the site's core purpose, attention to optimising web-page tagging and indexing in order to maximise Unistats' visibility more broadly on search engines ('search engine optimisation' or SEO) would be beneficial in order for a wider spectrum of potential users to come across the site. Furthermore the site has limited visibility on social media sites in contrast to some of its competitors who have more actively engaged with social media.

**Figure 1: Google search on ‘comparing universities’ (15<sup>th</sup> February 2013)**



**Figure 2: Google search on ‘choosing universities’ (15<sup>th</sup> February 2013)**



**Recommendation 4: Site promotion and SEO.** We assume there is an aspiration to increase traffic and penetration of the site amongst its target markets. To achieve this will require continued promotional efforts, although not to the extent undertaken at launch. Current user analytics reveal that the site is highly dependent on brand awareness for traffic. It is suggested that resources are invested in SEO in order to attract a more general audience to the site (i.e. the site is prominent in results of a range of typical searches for information about HE and choosing courses more generally).

**Recommendation 5: Social media strategy.** Social media currently account for very few referrals to the site. Furthermore the site does not facilitate the sharing of information via social media. It is suggested that a Unistats social media strategy is developed to enhance the site’s visibility within and integration with social media.

**Recommendation 6: Partnership building.** The site has to date received little traffic from referring sites. This research suggests that users are frequently looking to UCAS and newspaper websites for their information about HE and so these sites should be important targets for cross-linking. In particular, users would like to see the site more strongly inter-linked with the UCAS site to facilitate moving between the two sites. The research team's experience of evaluating other sites also suggests that there is potential traffic to be gained through building links with local authorities and schools through their learning and careers portals, and virtual learning environments.

At this early stage, most (68%) of referrals to the site have been from the KIS widgets on HE institutions' websites. However, concerns were raised about the visibility and usability of the widget, particularly amongst some key user groups, and it may be that the widget can be redesigned to be more effective. Parents who responded to the survey stated:

*The Unistats website link is often buried away and not easy to find.*

**Parent**

*Standard position of the widget would help.*

**Parent**

Observation of users revealed that many were indeed unable to identify the widgets on the course information pages of HE providers. HE providers typically have strongly branded websites with engaging content. The widget is fighting for user attention on these pages and frequently fails to attract users. Several users commented that they ignored buttons or text in the right hand margin of a web-page as this was typically where advertisements from external parties would appear, and had dismissed the widget as one of those. Furthermore an additional usability issue was observed with the widget, relating to the number of links that are offered on the widget.

**Recommendation 7: Widget.** The widget is a powerful tool in attracting traffic to the site. However the design of the widget could be improved as many users did not spot it, perceived it as spam/advertising or ignored it altogether. Furthermore there are two links from the widget 'Compare this course' which links to the course details within the Unistats site and 'KIS' which links to the main HEFCE site. Many participants found the two links confusing and were lost once they arrived on the HEFCE site. It is therefore suggested that the widget is redesigned to simplify its use and that links should lead directly to course information on the Unistats site.

#### **Key decision 2: Non-UK traffic/Internationalising the site**

The site is currently receiving around 10% of visits from users outside the UK. Given the importance of international students to UK higher education, further thought needs to be given to whether this user group is a priority. If non-UK prospective students are seen as a priority a study should be commissioned to examine how the Unistats site could be developed most effectively to support such international users.

## 1 How do people respond to the site?

In general, participants in the research were positive about Unistats and understood its purpose. The main user groups (prospective students, parents/carers and teachers and careers advisers) all understood the value of a comparison site for HE and felt that Unistats delivered an effective and useful tool.

*I liked the clear layout of the site and how easily you can get around it. I think the shortlist and comparison buttons are very clever and useful rather than having five windows open and having to click back and forth to compare statistics.*

**Sixth Form Student**

*It is very user friendly. There is a lot of information collected. The type of information available is useful and relevant. It is very interesting to be able to compare courses that have similar names.*

**Career Practitioner**

*Gives a lot of valuable information without changing site. Helps make choices easier as comparisons are on one page. Saves time making up your own comparison table.*

**Parent**

*I love the idea of comparing the universities as when I looked I used UCAS and spent forever looking through lists and lists of universities that may do the course I am now on. When the uni/course is selected you are able to add your own set of measures.*

*Brilliant.*

**HE Student**

Figure 3 illustrates, using a tag cloud visualisation, survey respondents' and fieldwork participants' first impressions of the website, when asked to select three adjectives to describe the site (from a list of twelve). Based on this analysis, the most commonly used adjectives were 'useful', 'official' but also 'easy' [to get around], although responses differed somewhat between types of respondents.

**Figure 3: Word cloud showing all respondents' selections of adjectives to describe the site (from a list of 12).**



In general, the end-users (prospective students, current students and parents) were more positive about the site in this exercise than professional users (careers advisers, teachers and HE staff) and more likely to describe the site as 'useful' and 'easy to get around'. This difference is probably explained by the fact that the professional users have more experience of looking at and evaluating these kinds of sites and are therefore more discerning and/or critical.

## **Branding**

Despite the generally positive impression that users reported about the site there was some confusion about the provenance of the site. On one hand some users felt that the independent and authoritative nature of the site was one of its key strengths:

*Showing all the facts and figures made it really easy to see the differences in the courses and showed you things that you might not find on the universities' websites which makes it easier to make your choice.*

**Sixth Form Student**

In contrast, however, other users revealed some uncertainty about the branding of the site. In particular, some were unable to identify the owner of the site or ascertain its level of authority and reliability/trustworthiness.

*Unistats needs its own logo.*

**HE Student**

*Needs to be clearer where info comes from, brand of site.*

**Parent**

Furthermore there was some confusion about exactly where a site like this would fit into the process of educational choice-making and how it might relate to application procedures (UCAS). Some users articulated a desire for further support in how to use the site effectively.

*A clear set (step by step) of instructions at the start of the process.*

**Parent**

*Explanation on the front page about how to use the site effectively rather than a click to find out this info.*

**Careers Adviser**

For some users (especially those returning to education after a break) this confusion was enhanced by the use of a range of what was perceived as HE jargon. In particular information about UCAS points, the use of course title abbreviations, e.g. BSc and terms such as 'sandwich', all provoked some confusion.

**Recommendation 8: 'About the site'/'Find out more'.** As some users (parents and prospective applicants) were unsure about the nature and ownership of the site, there would be value in developing the 'Find out more' section of the site, including 'About Unistats', to more clearly explain the brand and heritage of the site to the lay user, and to provide more general ideas about when and how best to use it as part of

educational and career decision-making (in addition to the current focus on detailed data issues).

**Recommendation 9: Branding.** Most users were able to describe the site as providing an HE comparison service. Some users were also able to articulate the Unistats brand as being authoritative. However, the branding would benefit from further articulation, in particular stressing that the site is impartial, government-owned and based on high quality data (and incorporates data from all HE providers rather than selectively).

**Recommendation 10: Glossary.** Some users reported being confused by some of the abbreviations and jargon used on the site e.g. MSc, KIS, National Student Survey. The creation of a dynamic glossary would help to alleviate this. This would build effectively on the HESA (2012) recommendation around qualification aim.

### Key decision 3: Prioritising the Unistats brand

The site includes, to some extent, two competing brands: Unistats and KIS. Some users found this confusing. In general, users were also able to identify Unistats as the main or stronger brand. It is therefore suggested that further thought should be given as to whether it is necessary to maintain these two brands or whether it would be advantageous to phase out one of the brands (most likely KIS) on the website and widget. If Unistats is chosen as the main brand, some public relations work could help potential audiences in associating it with its unique position of being ‘official’, and hence both authoritative and fully inclusive.

## Look and feel of the site

While opinions about the colour, design and feel of the site differed, the majority of users were happy with the way that the site appeared.

*It is well laid out. Does have a lot of information. Colourful. View on a map is useful.*

**Sixth Form Student**

*Clear layout. Well organised.*

**Sixth Form Student**

Some users felt that the site design was too stark and would have welcomed the addition of more pictures, other visual images and ‘human’ content.

*More colour and pictures would make the site more appealing*

**Sixth Form Student**

*Home page is a bit dull though, sorry.*

**Sixth Form Teacher**

*I find it dull and I think my teenagers would not take the time to absorb the comparison page information – they would take one look and say they could not find anything. It is functional but not engaging.*

**Parent**

There were no strong differences of opinion between different user groups around these issues although users with weaker IT skills were less confident in their use of the site. A number of small issues were identified by users with particular needs. People with a visual impairment found some of the text too small, while some users with dyslexia found the white background difficult to access. However, this evaluation did not incorporate a detailed assessment of accessibility. The UK HE funding bodies are currently working to gain an independent accreditation for the accessibility of the Unistats site from the Shaw Trust<sup>3</sup>. A full report will be published in the autumn but early findings from this research suggest that the site is performing well from an accessibility standpoint. Some of the findings of the accessibility work support the broad conclusions of this user research in suggesting that there would be value in reducing the volume and complexity of the information presented by the site.

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<sup>3</sup> The Shaw Trust is a national charity that works with organisations to help disabled people to access education and employment. For further information on the Shaw Trust see <http://www.shaw-trust.org.uk>.

## 2 How do people use the site?

Respondents to the survey reported using websites supporting HE choices in a variety of locations and contexts. Over 80% of non-professional users (i.e. prospective applicants, students and parents) reported that they used them at home alone, and around one third at home together with a parent/carer (see Table 3). Around 60% used them at school or college (the majority individually but around half of these in a group setting). A significant minority (14%) said they would access such websites whilst on the move.

**Table 3: Where end-user respondents have used websites relating to choices about careers and HE choices**

	End-users %
At home individually	83
At home (applicant and parent/carer together)	36
At school/college individually*	51
At school/college within group activity*	30
Whilst on the move	14
N	140

\*Excluding parents/carers

All survey respondents reported that they used either a desktop or laptop computer to access HE choice websites, but up to a fifth reported that they would also do so from a smartphone and about one in 10, a tablet (see Table 4). Discussions during fieldwork supported the finding that users would like to be able to access the site from a range of devices. Furthermore, the web statistics reveal that the site is being used from a wide variety of different operating systems, browsers and devices, with 11% of actual usage from smartphones and tablets already. Some users who were observed during the fieldwork using alternative devices found the site more difficult to use than those using PCs.

*Need to make the website compatible with different Internet browsers.*

**Sixth Form Student**

*On my tablet the website doesn't really work properly so I only use it on the computer which is slightly inconvenient for me.*

**Sixth Form Student**

*I would like more connections to social media.*

**HE Student**

**Table 4: Type of device used by survey respondents to undertake career research on the internet**

	End-users %	Advisers/teachers %
Desktop computer	56	83
Laptop	65	60
Tablet	10	17
Smartphone	20	14
Smart TV	<1	0
N	165	139

**Recommendation 11: Mobile optimisation.** There is a substantial minority of users accessing the site from mobile phones and other devices. It is therefore suggested that the possibility of optimising the site for the mobile web or the creation of mobile apps is explored.

The analytics data show that use of the site to date has been substantial, with over 105,000 unique visitors making over 205,000 site visits of which just under half were repeat visits. The average length of visit was over eight minutes, which is long in comparison with the use of many websites, during which 12 pages of the website were accessed (see Table 5).

**Table 5: Key web analytics statistics for the Unistats website, from launch to 9 January 2013 inclusive**

Number of unique visitors	106,350
Number of unique visits	206,122
Mean duration of visit	8 mins 25 secs
Mean number of pages visited	11.92
Proportion of new visitors	51%

[Information from Google Analytics]

Analysis of user behaviour suggests that 38% of visits involve use of the Search function on the site, and most of these more than once (see Table 6). Of these in-site searches, 16% of the 100 most common searches (which represented over 30% of all searches) were for HE institution names, compared with 81% for courses/subjects. Numerically, this was equivalent to 8.5% of these searches (or over 4,200 searches). The proportion of institution names within the next 200 most popular terms was higher still. From this we can infer that over 10% of all searches made are for institutions.

This pattern of behaviour is significant as the current search functionality does not produce results for institutions or locations (or information other than course titles). Specific recommendations on Search are included in the next section.

Usage of Welsh language site made up about 0.1% of the total visits. This figure corresponds closely to the ratio of Welsh speakers as a percentage of the population of England and Wales in the 2011 Census.<sup>4</sup> However, direct comparison is difficult as the site also covers Scotland and Northern Ireland while the census does not record Welsh speakers outside of Wales. It is also important to remember that these statistics have been taken at a very early stage and that it is dangerous to read too much into them in this context without specific research examining Welsh language usage.

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4 The 2011 Census records the population of England and Wales as 56,075,912. It records the number of Welsh speakers in Wales as 562,000. For further information on the 2011 Census visit <http://www.ons.gov.uk/ons/guide-method/census/2011/index.html>.

**Table 6: User search behaviour when using the Unistats website, launch to 9 January 2013**

Proportion of visits involving Search function	38.4%
Mean number of searches per visit	2.05
Proportion of searches resulting in second (different) search	28.7%
Mean number of pages visited after search	5.55
Most popular search terms	Psychology Economics Law History Medicine
Type of top 100 (most popular) search terms	Subject/course 81% Course code 3% HE institution 16%
Number of searches made amongst top 100 (most popular) searches	Subject/course 90.1% Course code 1.4% HE institution 8.5%

[Information from Google Analytics]

**Recommendation 12: Usability and technical issues.** The research team have identified a number of minor usability and technical issues through the course of the research. A full list of these will be passed to HEFCE and their design team to address.

### 3 Navigating the site, searching, filtering and comparing

Although the research examined a range of aspects of the user experience it particularly focused on exploring the core usability issues related to the effective functioning of a comparison site: the search, filtering and comparison functions. This section relates the key findings that emerged in relation to these aspects of the site.

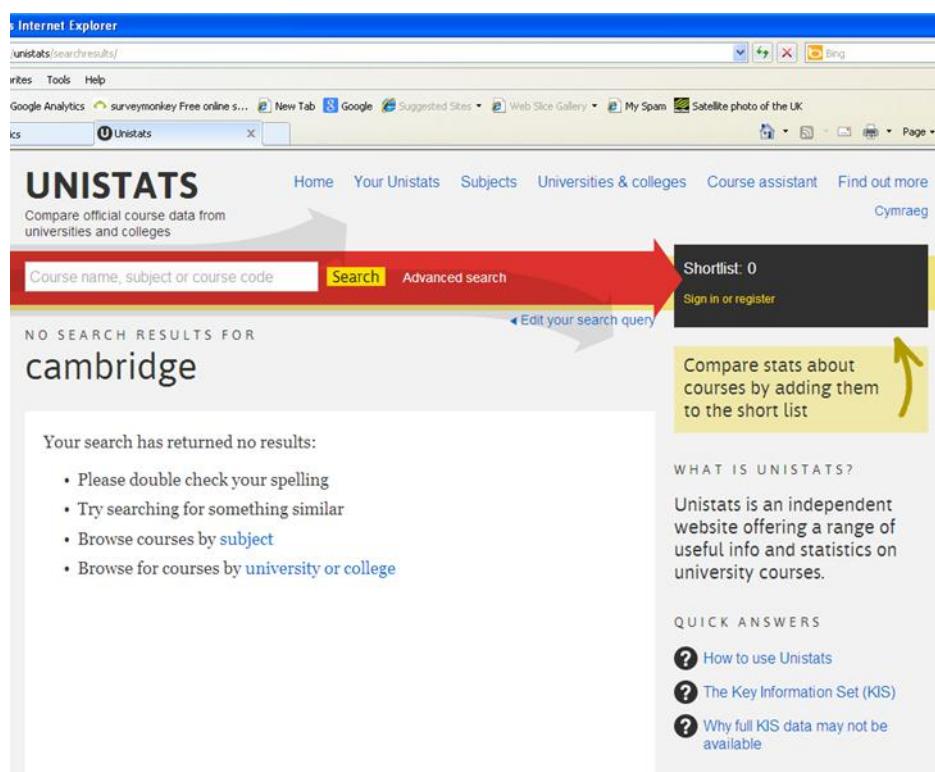
#### Search

In general, there was a strong reliance by users on Search as the key way of accessing information on the site. This was directly observed during the fieldwork but can also be inferred from the user analytics, i.e. more end-users have sought courses (with a view to comparing them) via the Search box than through the ‘Courses’ menu. For example, the most commonly investigated subject to date is Psychology and there have been more than twice as many page views of the page presented when this term is entered into the Search box than of the page when the ‘Courses’ menu is used. The same pattern can be observed for other popular subjects such as English or Medicine.

The issues with Search were the same across both versions of the site (English and Welsh). The value of Search as a strategy for interrogating the site was undermined by a number of issues:

While Search worked relatively well for courses (subjects or titles), it is seriously flawed if a user searches for anything else. Searches for an institution or location, whilst relatively common, do not return any results (unless those words appear in a course title).

Figure 4: Unistats search for “Cambridge” (15<sup>th</sup> February 2013).



Search requires a high level of accuracy from the user and is poor at correcting common spelling mistakes or using semantic logic to substitute alternative terms, e.g. substituting Plant Science as the correct term when ‘Botany’ is entered;

**Figure 5 Unistats search for “Botany”**

The screenshot shows a Microsoft Internet Explorer browser window displaying the Unistats website. The URL in the address bar is <http://unistats/searchresults>. The page title is "UNISTATS". The main search bar contains the query "botany". A red arrow points from the search bar to the "Shortlist: 0" message. Another red arrow points from the "Edit your search query" link to the "Compare stats about courses by adding them to the short list" button. The page also includes a sidebar with "WHAT IS UNISTATS?" and "QUICK ANSWERS" sections.

There are issues with the ordering of search results rendered. In some cases this can result in a large number of entries from a single institution. This approach to rendering search results is not intuitive, can sometimes seem to favour particular institutions and does not aid users to compare different courses.

The rendering of search results frequently results in an excessive number of search results that it is difficult for the user to parse. Many observed users reporting being overwhelmed when faced with 700 or more results, through which they had to scroll 25 at a time.

*Need to be able to write the university into the search column ... Had to go the long way round in order to find, for example, Durham University instead of being able to search for it,*

**Sixth Form Student**

*List for Business Studies far too long: results it came up with were in no order of course title, location or university, very random and it took a long time to look at all the results. Each course at each university listed makes the list huge.*

**HE Staff Member**

*Is there a reason why the search results list courses in the order that they do? This is misleading whereas alphabetical would not be.*

**Careers Adviser**

*It seems like a good idea; however, it has many flaws. In the results, the first 25 results were from one uni.*

**Sixth Form Student**

User expectations are relatively high in relation to search functionality, not just from the sophisticated functionality of search engines like Google, but also from certain competitor sites to Unistats, which offer some aspects of ‘intelligence’ within their search functionality. The Advanced Search option on Unistats does offer certain filters for the user, but did not tend to solve the search problems encountered by observed users.

**Recommendation 13: Search.** The Search function on the site works well provided the user enters a term that appears within formal course titles. However, there is a need to review the operation of the Search tool, particularly to ensure that it is capable of recognising institutions and locations, as well as course titles and reference numbers. There is also a need to ensure that the search is able to deal with alternative versions of course titles (and common mis-spellings) and to understand the underlying semantics of different courses. This recommendation builds on the HESA (2012) recommendations for increasing the range of search fields.

**Recommendation 14: Rendering of search results.** Unistats frequently returns a large number of results (often many hundreds) from a search or menu selection. This regularly comprises 20 or more pages of results, in many cases with large numbers of courses from the same institution appearing. It is suggested that strategies are explored to improve the rendering of results to allow more effective comparison, e.g. presenting the institutions where courses are located and then offering users the option to drill down into the courses that are available from the institutions they select.

## Menus

The adoption of structured taxonomies like the ‘Courses’ (based on the JACS codes) and ‘Universities & colleges’ menus is useful in providing users with an alternative to Search in accessing the site’s content. However, some users found that these menus were difficult to use. While this may suggest that further attention needs to be given to refining the taxonomies that underpin the menus, it is worth noting that they are unlikely ever to fully match with the mental schema that are used by all of the site’s diverse users.

*Subject categories should be explained better e.g. Social Science included Economics.*

**Sixth Form Student**

*When I searched Medicine hundreds of results for Medical Chemistry and Science came up so I had to scroll down through them all which was a bit long and time-consuming. Uni courses not all together e.g. all Medicine courses in Liverpool mixed*

*up so made them harder to find as I clicked on Medicinal Chemistry by mistake as there were so many options.*

### **Sixth Form Student**

*Everything is Miscellaneous*, Weinberger (2008) states that the kinds of conventional taxonomies utilised by libraries were compromises that were necessary in a system where everything had to be physically shelved and could not be in two places at once. So Psychology (the most commonly sought course by Unistats users to date) needed to be located either in Social Science or Biological Science, but could not exist in both. However, a decision about where to put a subject like Psychology might be made one way by the designers of the JACS codes and another way by some users. All of the different users of the sites with different life experiences, levels of disciplinary understanding and awareness of JACS are likely to approach this in different ways. There are also some similar problems in the organisation of the institutional menu.

*Search by institution is bizarre. A-Z is not easy to use. For example, City of Westminster is not under C but other City institutions are.*

### **Careers Adviser**

Weinberger goes on to argue that, in a digital environment, a decision about where something goes does not necessarily have to be made, as one course or one institution can simultaneously be placed in many places. In fact, as long as the Search tool is powerful enough, it is possible to find any one course or discipline without reference to a taxonomy or menu at all. The point is not that menus and taxonomies are not useful, indeed many users found them to be helpful in their exploration of the site. Rather, it is worth recognising that no matter how well designed these menus are they will not meet the needs of all users and that they cannot be expected to compensate for any failings of the Search functions.

**Recommendation 15: Navigation structures.** The current home page presents users with two menu structures for navigating the site ('Courses' and 'Universities & colleges'). As more participants in the research used the Search function than these menus, and this pattern is also observed in user analytics, it is suggested that the Search and Advanced Search functions should be made more prominent and the search functionality enhanced, and the prominence of the menus potentially reduced on the home page.

**Recommendation 16: The 'Universities & colleges' menu.** It is recommended that both the information accessed via the 'Universities & colleges' menu and its presentation should be reviewed to make the range of courses available at an institution more clear. The nature of institutional information offered, for example a map showing its administrative offices, might be reconsidered so as to be more relevant to potential applicants. This might also be an opportunity to introduce some visual content as requested by some observed users.

**Recommendation 17: The 'Courses' menu.** The 'Courses' menu currently relies on knowledge of JACS codes. Not all courses within the JACS taxonomy are located in the most intuitive place and so a 'look-up' table or other supporting device would be useful. For example, user analytics reveal that the most common search is for

Psychology; few users are aware that they would need to select Biological Sciences in the menu to find it.

## Filters

Users also reported that the site does not provide sufficiently strong or relevant tools for them to filter results down into lists that can practically be used for comparison and decision-making. The two issues most commonly identified in the fieldwork were the ability to search and filter using:

- Geographical information – especially relating to proximity to their home. Many participants in the fieldwork started their searches by looking for local institutions of which they had some awareness. This was particularly true for students from Scotland, Northern Ireland and Wales. Although filters already exist for these countries, some students found these insufficient for their needs as they were interested in the relative proximity to their home. Some users (notably those in Northern Ireland) were aware that institutions' campuses might be spread over a wide geographical area. These users expressed some concerns that the site currently does not recognise this and would like recognitions of dispersed campuses built into any future developments of the site's geographical functionality.
- UCAS tariffs or typical entry requirements – many users were surprised not to be able to filter by entry requirements, UCAS tariff or some other proxy for this such as qualifications of recent entrants. This is used as a filter, in some cases very prominently, on competitor websites, and the issue was identified as one of the four most 'important' types of data in our online survey (see Section 6).

*I find it difficult to narrow down search except by UK region. This can be frustrating when scrolling through course choices.*

**Careers Adviser**

*I wish there could be more options to narrow down the universities such as minimum grade requirement and area.*

**Sixth Form Student**

*It is very difficult to filter the courses to get to a reasonable length list.*

**Parent**

*Need easier general search including UCAS points required and geographical location.*

**Parent**

The Unistats site provides the UCAS points obtained by (and other information about) students who recently entered courses, but this is not provided within the 'overview' (default) KIS items offered. While 340,000 visits have included viewing this 'overview' KIS information, only a handful of visits have viewed the entry information under the 'entry' tab, presumably because it is not prominent. Equally, amongst the 1.5 million pages viewed

uniquely to date, only 4,000 of them have been through the ‘Your Unistats’ tab which is another mechanism through which this entry information might be sought.

**Recommendation 18: Filtering options.** Many users failed to find or use the available filters, or could not filter using the type of information they wanted to. It is therefore suggested that the filtering capability is made more prominent and redeveloped so as to include more of the key issues users identify as important within the evaluation.

**Recommendation 19: Search and filter by location.** Users expressed strong desire to search and filter by the geographical location of an institution/course and its proximity to their home. It is therefore suggested that geographical data is used in the redevelopment of the Search and Filter functions. This recommendation aligns with the recommendation on location made by HESA (2012).

## Compare

Most users liked the comparison feature on the site and found it easy to use and to compare courses.

*Comparison page is very easy to read. Shortlist option is useful*  
**Sixth Form Student**

*The process was quick. Statistics broken down in an easy-to-view way.*  
**Trainee Careers Adviser**

*Allows information to be processed and compared in a common format.*  
**Careers Adviser**

*For someone who doesn't go to comparison sites, I was very impressed at how easy it was to access the information I needed.*  
**HE Staff Member**

Some participants reported some challenges in using the comparison feature, including difficulty in removing selected courses from their shortlist.

*It's really difficult to clear choices - I work with students so keep changing my 'preferences' but it's not easy.*  
**Careers Adviser**

*The ‘compare courses’ is the most interesting part, but initially it is hard to get started.*  
**Sixth Form Teacher**

However, in general the ability to look at courses side by side was seen as effective, although (as discussed elsewhere in this report) some participants reported being overwhelmed by the amount of data.

*It's just a massive list.*

## **Sixth Form Student**

*There was lots of information but no independent ranking of the courses and a lot of relatively meaningless stats to wade through.*

## **Trainee Careers Adviser**

During the fieldwork, detailed observation was made of users undertaking tasks using the site, and questions were posed about the issues and information types that they considered most important in their decision-making.

### **Key decision 4: Entry requirements/Qualifications of previous entrants**

Users expressed a strong desire to search and filter by course entry requirements. It is recommended that this is used as part of the re-development of the Search and Filter functions. However, it is recognised that there are both technical and political challenges in utilising entry requirements. An alternative solution might be allowing users to search by the qualifications of previous entrants. These data are currently available on the site.

It is suggested that further thought be given as to whether users should be allowed to search by either entry requirements or qualifications of previous entrants and what mechanism might be used to aggregate the diverse range of entry qualifications into searchable data. One option would clearly be to use the current UCAS tariff system, which is quite widely understood by users. However, there could also be alternative mechanisms which could be used. Careful thought should also be given as to how these data are presented to make it clear that the data may not correspond to either current entry requirements or the full range of what HE providers will accept.

## 4 Data issues

Users generally found that the site provided them with a large amount of information to support their decision-making, of varying degrees of usefulness. Most end-users found the type of information that was provided by the site useful (many parents/carers commented that they had never thought about considering many of these types of information). Most of the suggestions for additional information were from advisers seeking detail, rather than end-users. User testing revealed some concerns amongst participants about the sheer quantity of data that they were being asked to parse whilst using the site. There was a strong desire for more guidance on which data were likely to be important.

*It looks a little too confusing i.e. too much stuff on the page; it is too cramped.  
More aesthetically pleasing.*

**Sixth Form Student**

*When searching an institution to see what courses they offer the course lists are too long and a bit confusing.*

**HE Staff Member**

*It's very stats-heavy. Lots of numbers without any anecdotal or background information. I think the average person looking at undergraduate courses would find the numbers overwhelming and potentially a bit meaningless.*

**Careers Adviser**

**Recommendation 20: Rendering of data.** A number of participants expressed concerns about being overwhelmed by data. The data tables presented to aid comparison are frequently long and complex. It is therefore recommended that a smaller range of data is routinely presented (i.e. grouped under headings) but that users are able to drill down into these data to obtain more specific data where they seek it.

## What data users were most interested in

Participants in the groups and also survey respondents were most interested in data focusing on entry requirements, course content, the quality of the student experience and graduate employability. The issues that prospective applicants, parents and current students rated most important when considering HE applications were course content, entry qualifications/tariff, geographical location and student satisfaction, followed by employment destination information (see Table 7). The most important issues that the advisers recommended correlated very well with this, albeit with greater attention to career destinations and less to issues of student satisfaction. Users articulated the information that they were looking to get from a site of this kind in a number of ways.

*Entry requirements and more information about the university itself.*

**Sixth Form Student**

*Entry requirements. Course description. Employment/job options on graduation. How the degree will help me in the future.*

**Sixth Form Student**

*You can see the difference in the levels of employment after the course which is useful in deciding which course to pick. I also like how you can know how different courses are taught in different ways.*

**Sixth Form Student**

*What would be needed to be able to get into the university.*

**School Teacher**

*Entrance criteria. Tuition fees. Employment prospects following graduation.  
Success rate of students taking course. Support services available at university.*

**Parent**

*Likelihood of employment at end. Types of career that would follow. Course content/teaching/assessment strategies. Costs. Duration/locations.  
Comments/views of past students. Independent assessments/comments/ratings.*

**Parent**

*Employability, satisfaction rates.*

**Parent**

*It would be useful to see where students were working and more information on job prospects.*

**HE Staff Member**

**Table 7: Most important issues when considering applying to HE, reported by end-users (applicants/parents/students) and as recommended by advisers (percentages total more than 100% as respondents gave top three options).**

	<i>End-users (%)</i>	<i>Advisers' recommendation (%)</i>
<b>Course content or combinations offered</b>	<b>61</b>	<b>63</b>
<b>Entry qualifications needed (UCAS tariff/points, exam grades)</b>	<b>50</b>	<b>74</b>
<b>Geographical location of university/college</b>	<b>40</b>	<b>20</b>
<b>Student satisfaction with course, teaching and support</b>	<b>40</b>	<b>28</b>
<b>Employment/job destination</b>	<b>30</b>	<b>57</b>

<b>information after graduation</b>		
Course fee levels	26	18
Accommodation costs	24	3
Type of university/college (e.g. Russell Group)	24	13
Student views of university/college life and location	22	11
Average entry tariff (grades) of recent students	20	10
Coursework requirements	16	10
Availability of bursaries or extra help	16	19
Salaries obtained after graduation	13	8
Hours of teaching	10	5
Details of how the university or college spends its fee income	<1	1
<b>N</b>	<b>160</b>	<b>146</b>

## The presentation of data

There were some concerns about the way in which data were presented. The use of various icons, roll-over text and other forms of information about the data was sometimes perceived as confusing. Statistical caveats were interpreted by some less well informed participants as invalidating the data. This was particularly an issue where data were missing or where two sets of data were presented. Users were frequently unsure how to deal with missing data and unclear as to what to infer about the course they were looking at as a result.

*Make the different sections of comparison clearer; when comparing unis one section had two different percentage answers for the same uni. This was confusing as you don't know which one is correct.*

**Sixth Form Student**

*I think sample numbers of students involved makes data slightly narrow as the site does not give a wide view of lots of students. The symbols such as the 'E' symbol are confusing when comparing courses, making me doubt how trustworthy the site is. The fact that when you do a separate search your previous courses are still shortlisted is confusing.*

### **Sixth Form Student**

Some concerns were also expressed regarding the reliability and quality of data.

*Collect more data because it is harder to trust all the samples which say the data is insufficient because of small survey sizes.*

### **Sixth Form Student**

*It needs to identify its data sources more explicitly and qualify student opinions which are exceptionally subjective judgements based on a snapshot of experiences.*

### **HE Staff Member**

*Some of the data is only from a small sample of people.*

### **Sixth Form Student**

## **Additional data**

The main area in which users would like additional data was contextual information. Unistats assumes that users are interested in the comparison of course information, whereas in reality educational choices are made taking into account a wider range of factors. These include information about the nature of the course itself, contextual information about the institutions within which the course is offered including about the location of the institution, and wider aspects of the student experience.

*If you don't know details of courses then you could be looking at a course that is not actually what you want.*

### **Prospective Mature Student**

We found almost no enthusiasm at all amongst any user group in relation to providing more information about institutions' costs (i.e. how they allocate expenditure).

Several users were interested in 'drop-out rates' (in their words). The site does contain continuation rates and it could be that simple re-titling of the information would increase access to and usage of this data.

In addition to the commonly made requests for entry requirements information, some users articulated interest in entry competition ratios (i.e. offers or acceptances to applications).

## **Contextual information**

Unistats provides its users with a high volume of factual information relating to the course and the institution. However, some users expressed interest in wider contextual information about the institution, the community in which it is situated and the student experience. It is important to acknowledge that the Unistats site does currently link to institutional sites which provide much or all of this information, but not all users found this strategy of linking to be satisfactory.

If the UK HE funding bodies' strategic ambition is to provide a website that is widely used by its potential end-user audiences, it is worth noting the positive comments made by research participants about the inclusion of contextual information on competitor sites such as Which?

University. Some such information is offered relatively quantitatively, including as filters based on aspects of student life (e.g. ‘strong union nightlife’) or environment (e.g. ‘campus’), while other information is purely for visual effect such as campus photographs. Although such information may add relatively little in terms of information content, it appeared to be sufficient for prospective applicants (sixth form students) to express a preference for that website over Unistats. Notwithstanding Unistats’ deliberate aim to be a site containing quantitative data enabling comparisons, consideration should be given to whether limited inclusion of contextual data could aid attractiveness to users.

**Recommendation 21: Additional data.** There was no strong desire from participants for additional data to be provided: in general they were concerned about being overwhelmed by data rather than demanding more. However, a small minority of participants expressed interest in data on drop-out/retention rates and the ratio of applications to acceptances, as well as more prominence for entry requirements (UCAS tariffs or similar). It may be worth considering the practicality of such additions in further development of the site.

**Recommendation 22: Better integration between institutional and course information.** Currently the course information and institutional information are not well integrated. Participants in the research were generally interested in the institutional context for courses. It is therefore recommended that the site should present course and institutional information in a more related format, and that integration between these two forms of information be improved.

**Recommendation 23: Statistical caveats.** The site uses a range of icons, roll-over text and other tools to explain the reliability of data and to provide information about the statistics behind the data. Some users found the presence of the caveats and other statistical information difficult to understand. In some cases this led them to express concerns about the usefulness of the data altogether. There would be value in experimenting with some alternative approaches to presenting the data and conducting focused usability testing to explore this issue further.

#### Key decision 5: Reliability of data

The site has a high quality threshold for the inclusion of data, which leaves some courses with missing data. This is a particular issue for colleges offering courses with relatively modest student enrolments.

Some users reported that this missing data, especially when combined with other statistical caveats and information, undermined their confidence in the comprehensive coverage and usefulness of the site. For others it led to specific concerns about the courses that had missing or caveated data.

It may therefore be desirable to review the thresholds required for course data and how these are most effectively communicated to a range of different users. This is particularly important to ensure a level playing field in the HE market, as these issues impact particularly strongly on certain types of institutions (typically smaller and newer HE providers). Consequently, there may be a case for adjusting the data quality threshold.

### **Key decision 6: The inclusion of contextual and qualitative data**

Unistats was designed as a data-rich site providing quantitative information which can be compared. While many users related positively to this quantitative focus, there were some concerns that it did not provide sufficient information for decision-making. Many users stressed the importance of qualitative and contextual information as a key part of their decision, as well as its role in making the site attractive to them. Broadly this can be broken down into four areas which should be considered in the future development of the site:

- Course information e.g. course descriptions and module lists
- Institutional information e.g. pictures of the campus, information about the history and culture of the institution
- Information about the community within which the course is located e.g. whether urban or rural, provision of facilities aimed at students etc
- Information about the wider student experience e.g. whether students enjoy aspects of their experience beyond the course, which activities they pursue etc.

It is suggested that these aspects are considered as the site is developed further, in relation to HEFCE's strategic intentions for the website.

## 5 Conclusions

This user experience evaluation reveals a generally positive picture of the Unistats site at this early stage of its development. There is already some degree of awareness and use of the site, largely in response to launch promotions, amongst its target audiences. These audiences appear to welcome the site's aims, purpose and approach, and suggest that it has the potential to play a useful role in the market of online careers information.

Users endorse the majority of information provided from the KIS dataset, and seek little other data other than some contextual information. The key recommendations in relation to development of the Unistats site relate to how those data are accessed, filtered and rendered, in order to increase usability and offer a more rewarding user experience.

Other recommendations relate to clearer guidance on using the site and also about its brand and position, which are potentially powerful assets. We assume that HEFCE and its stakeholders seek to maximise user traffic and increase the site's impact through deeper penetration in its target markets. If so, the recommendations on activities for continued promotion, including increased linkage from key sites, search engine optimisation and integration with social media, should be considered.

The extent to which such aims, i.e. penetration into and wider impact within its target user markets, are achieved will be more effectively assessed by further evaluation work once the site is more mature, potentially after another HE 'application cycle'. However, on the basis of this early user evaluation, conducted in the first few months of life of the Unistats site, there is much on which to build positively.

*Great data but site needs simplifying.*

**Careers Adviser**

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## **Appendix: Methodology**

The evaluation was organised over five phases: inception and planning, analysis of analytics data, online survey, fieldwork and reporting.

### **Inception and planning**

The initial phase of the evaluation took place before the public launch of the Unistats site. During this phase the evaluation team met with HEFCE to clarify the project's objectives and approach. Important tasks during this phase were to agree the fieldwork sites, approach to the analysis of web statistics and to draft the survey instrument.

### **Exploration of web analytics data**

HEFCE receives monthly reports with summary usage data for Unistats from its website contractors. Some further analysis was undertaken by the evaluation team using Google Analytics. This provided an overview for the cumulative period of the website's life from launch to 9 January 2013. This phase of the project also allowed the evaluation team the opportunity to probe more deeply into some specific issues including search behaviour and the use of certain filters and information.

### **Online survey**

An online survey of current Unistats users and potential users was undertaken in order to provide information from a wider range of respondents than could be reached through the observed group fieldwork. This also afforded some prospect of assessing levels of awareness and penetration of the site into its potential audiences, although it was recognised that undertaking this work immediately after extensive launch promotions could limit the long-term representativeness of such findings.

An online questionnaire was designed using the SurveyMonkey platform, using internal logic to provide pathways within the questionnaire containing questions appropriate to several different types of users. The majority of questions were quantitative, although a small number of open-ended responses were invited relating to certain topics. A Welsh language version was produced, with the assistance from the staff of HEFCW, so that Welsh-speaking respondents had the choice to answer an English or Welsh questionnaire. After limited cognitive testing the survey was made live on 27 November 2012 and remained open for responses until the beginning of February 2013.

A survey attraction strategy was implemented, largely by issuing e-mails containing an invitation to participate and link to the survey. These were sent to lists held by CRAC, the University of Derby and HEFCE as well as through a wide range of third parties, comprising career and education sector organisations, educational institutions and other contacts. We are most grateful for their help in publicising the survey. A link to the survey was placed on the Unistats homepage (both English and Welsh versions) part-way through the survey period.

The survey drew a total of 619 responses, which were exported and analysed to provide quantitative findings for this report and certain individual quotations (entered as open-ended responses). A summary of respondent types and characteristics is provided in Table A.1. Although just under 30 responses were received from respondents resident in Wales, only a single response was received to the Welsh language questionnaire.

**Table A.1: Summary of online survey respondent characteristics**

		N	%
Respondent type		<b>619</b>	<b>100</b>
	Prospective applicants	88	14.2
	Parents	48	7.8
	Current HE students	51	8.2
	Teachers/advisers	166	26.8
	HE staff	242	39.1
	Employers	24	3.9
Country (where given)		<b>446</b>	<b>100</b>
	England	376	84.4
	N Ireland	6	1.3
	Scotland	21	4.7
	Wales	26	5.8
	Non-UK	17	3.8

Of the end-users (prospective students, parents/carers, current HE students) 22% reported that they were from ethnic minority backgrounds, which broadly corresponds to the current national HE student body. Around 8% of all respondents reported some disability or learning condition, but only one respondent reported any issues relating to the website due to this (seeking different colours).

In terms of educational sector, prospective applicant and parent/carer respondents were predominantly in state-supported schools, academies or sixth form colleges. The respondents labelled in this report as ‘advisers’ were mostly careers professionals working in state-supported schools or colleges, although around 15% were subject teachers or managerial staff.

Just under half of the prospective applicants reported having at least one parent with HE experience, but the strong majority of parent/carer respondents had experienced HE themselves.

Due to the size and shape of sample obtained, the results have not been analysed by personal or demographic characteristics.

#### **Fieldwork: Observations and focus groups**

The core of the research was based around qualitative fieldwork activity. This process engaged a total of 294 participants spread across 22 sites (Table A.2).

**Table A.2: Observation and focus group sites**

<b>England</b>	
Long Eaton School, Derbyshire	Sixth Form students Sixth Form teaching staff Parents Widening Participation practitioners
University of Derby	Parents of Sixth Form students Widening Participation practitioners
Sheaf Training, Sheffield	Advanced Apprentices Adult Advanced Apprentices Work Based Learning staff
East Midlands Unionlearn	Learning Reps
AIM, Huddersfield	Adult learners in a mental health setting
Queen Elizabeth VI Form College, Darlington	Sixth Form students Parents
Comberton Village College, Cambridge	Sixth Form students
Villiers Park Educational Trust, Cambridge	Widening Participation learners
Ruskin Anglia University, Cambridge	HE students HE staff
<b>Northern Ireland</b>	
Northern Regional College, Belfast	FE students FE staff
Queens University, Belfast	HE staff HE students
St Mary's School	Sixth Form students

	Teachers Parents
<b>Scotland</b>	
Stonelaw High School, Glasgow	Sixth Form students Sixth Form teachers
University of West Scotland	Trainee career practitioners
North Glasgow College	FE learners – Sixth Form students FE learners – vocational
Strathclyde University	HE careers advisers
University of Glasgow	HE students
Mitchell Library, Glasgow	Parents
<b>Wales</b>	
Bangor University	HE students Students with disabilities Widening Participation practitioners - Welsh-speaking
Ysgol Bodedern	Sixth Form students - Welsh-speaking
Ysgol Nantlle	Sixth Form students – Welsh-speaking
Careers Wales	Careers advisers Careers advisers – Welsh-speaking

The evaluation team included a Welsh-speaking researcher who conducted some of the fieldwork in Welsh. Research materials were available in both English and Welsh.

During the fieldwork process researchers worked with cohorts of participants: prospective students, including both young people and adults; current HE students; teachers and advisers; university outreach staff and parents and carers. The fieldwork explored the usability of the site and the widget, users' reactions to them and ideas for further improvements.

The fieldwork sessions were generally conducted in ICT laboratories in the fieldwork locations. Participants were issued with workbooks which introduced the site to them and asked them to conduct an exploratory exercise using the site for 30 minutes. During their exploration they were asked to record key pieces of information, along with issues and concerns in their workbooks. They were also observed by researchers who asked users to clarify issues that they raised and kept them on task.

Following the half-hour exercise participants were asked to contribute to a discussion about the resource that they had just used and how it contributed to their exploration of HE course information.

Each fieldwork session resulted in a series of workbooks that were then transcribed and entered into a database, together with a set of researcher notes on observations and the group discussion.

### **Reporting**

All of the data collected during the web statistics analysis, the online survey and the fieldwork were then analysed independently. Following this, the evaluation team met with a representative from HEFCE to explore the themes that had emerged and develop a report structure. Early findings were shared with key stakeholders via HEFCE's Early Evaluation Oversight Group and the HEPISG (Higher Education Public Information Steering Group). Following feedback, the final report, key decisions and recommendations were drafted.

## List of abbreviations

BIS	Department for Business, Innovation & Skills
DELNI	Department for Employment and Learning, Northern Ireland
DLHE	Destinations for Leavers of Higher Education
FE	Further education
HE	Higher education
HEFCE	Higher Education Funding Council for England
HEFCW	Higher Education Funding Council for Wales
HEPISG	Higher Education Public Information Steering Group
HESA	Higher Education Statistics Agency
iCeGS	International Centre for Guidance Studies
JACS	Joint Academic Coding System
KIS	Key Information Set
NSS	National Student Survey
NUS	National Union of Students
QAA	Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education
SEO	Search engine optimisation
SFC	Scottish Funding Council
UKCES	UK Commission for Employment and Skills