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# Case Studies of Equality Data Collection in the Scottish Public Sector: The Open University in Scotland



**Equality, Poverty and Social Security**



# A good practice case study of the collection and use of equality data: The Open University in Scotland

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The Scottish Government is committed to addressing inequality in Scotland. [Scotland's Equality Evidence Strategy 2017–21](#) set out a vision for a more wide-ranging and robust equality evidence base, to enable policy makers to develop sound, inclusive policy.

There are many costs and challenges to collecting, analysing and reporting equality data and, despite improvements in recent years, significant gaps remain in Scotland's equality evidence base. To address this, the Scottish Government launched the [Equality Data Improvement Programme](#) in April 2021. This programme builds on [research](#) which explored the collection of equality and socio-economic disadvantage data by Scottish public sector bodies.<sup>1</sup> The 27 organisations who took part in this research faced various barriers and challenges in this area of work, but they also identified factors that helped support the collection and use of high-quality equality data.

This document presents one of a series of six case studies produced to complement this research. The case studies aim to support the sharing of good practice by showing how different organisations have approached collecting and using equality data to provide better services and better outcomes for their 'customers'. Each of the case studies illustrates different aspects of practice across the public sector in Scotland. They do not provide a comprehensive picture of the work undertaken by organisations; rather they illustrate some of their positive actions in collecting, using and improving equality data.

## The Open University ....

- Created a new Dean of Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) in November 2020, and is establishing a new EDI committee within the university's formal governance structure.
- Was the first university in Scotland to introduce a policy for the ethical use of student data for learning analytics.

In common with others in the higher education sector, The Open University in Scotland:

- Collects information on protected characteristics, and on indicators of socio-economic disadvantage, including whether students are care-experienced, have caring responsibilities, and are estranged from their family.
- Collects detailed information about students' disabilities (including information about any learning and communication difficulties or mental health issues) to provide tailored, personalised support for student learning. They also recently set up a marker on the student registration form to identify British Sign Language users.
- Draws on the support and best practice guidance available from [Advance HE](#) in developing its collection and use of equality data.
- Uses equality data in a systematic way to evaluate their teaching and learning systems.

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<sup>1</sup> Note: 'equality data' refers to 'equality and socio-economic disadvantage data' and covers the protected characteristics defined by the Equality Act 2010 (age, religion and belief, race, disability, sex, sexual orientation, pregnancy and maternity, marriage and civil partnership, and gender reassignment) and (any) indicators of socio-economic disadvantage.

## About The Open University in Scotland

The Open University in Scotland (OU) offers the opportunity to study flexible, part-time higher education, based on a supported, distance learning model. Its open admissions policy means no formal entry requirements are needed for most undergraduate qualifications or modules. A key focus of the OU's work is ensuring that people from Scotland's most disadvantaged groups and communities can access higher education at any stage of their lives to help improve their work and life opportunities. The OU works in partnership with many other organisations to reach people from the most deprived areas, disabled people and chronic health conditions, carers, minority ethnic groups, care-experienced people and other disadvantaged groups. They embed support for these individuals into curriculum design and delivery across the entirety of the student's learning journey.

Equality, diversity and inclusion (EDI) has been adopted as one of the five strategic goals of the OU's [institutional strategy](#).<sup>2</sup> Further reflecting the OU's strategic commitment to the EDI agenda, a new senior role of Dean of Equality, Diversity and Inclusion was created in November 2020 and there is to be a new EDI committee which operates as part of the formal governance structure.

## The data collections

The OU's main administrative data collection is its student records database. Students apply directly to the OU and a student record is created or updated every time an individual applies to undertake a module or qualification with the OU.<sup>3</sup> The equality data which are collected for the higher education sector is [required by statute](#), and is regularly reviewed by the Scottish Funding Council (as well as by other relevant funding bodies elsewhere in the UK) who also set outcome agreements (including targets for recruitment and outcomes for groups who are under-represented in higher education relative to the population). This means that the specific items collected, and the response categories offered are standardised and harmonised across the whole of the higher education sector in Scotland.

Registration / enrolment to the OU is usually done online, through a secure web interface, but completion of the process may also require paper submissions (e.g. where a student is applying for particular types of financial support). The student record is a 'live' record, which may be updated at any time since students have access to their records through an online portal. Currently, information is requested on all protected characteristics except pregnancy and maternity, and gender reassignment.<sup>4</sup> Socio-economic disadvantage data – including parental education, occupational status, individual income and information about any dependents the

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<sup>2</sup> Note that The Open University in Scotland is part of the wider 4-Nations Open University, which operates across the whole of the UK.

<sup>3</sup> In contrast to other universities, all OU registrations are made directly and not via the Universities and Colleges Admission Service (UCAS). As a consequence, all student information has to be collected directly by the OU.

<sup>4</sup> Information about gender reassignment has not been collected in previous years. The Higher Education Statistics Agency have made this a mandatory requirement for providers in England, Wales and Northern Ireland for the 2020/21 data collection (due for submission autumn 2021); it remains an optional requirement for providers in Scotland.

student has (all of which align with domains which make up the Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation) – are also collected.

### Good practice in the collection and use of equality data

The higher education sector focus on requesting and collecting all personal data (including equality data) helps the University to support the individual student experience. In particular, the OU collects as much information as possible about any disability (including information about any learning and communication difficulties or any mental health issues) that the student may have which could affect their learning.<sup>5</sup> More broadly, for the purposes of both statutory reporting and impacting the student learning experience, the higher education sector requests a wide range of information which goes beyond the defined protected characteristics and covers aspects which can be seen as ‘wider equality characteristics’. Examples of this include: care experience, carer status, British Sign Language user, disabled veteran and estrangement from family.

The data collection itself is undertaken in a number of ways, throughout the student journey. Whilst most of the information (including equality data and data about ‘wider equality characteristics’) is collected online, there is scope for students to provide paper-based information or information over the phone. There are also a range of formal and informal opportunities for students to discuss any changes to their circumstances and equality data with their tutors; tutors may also initiate a conversation if they become aware of any change. The OU undertakes an annual data improvement process to address particular gaps in statutory information required and has an ongoing focus to improve data declaration rates and better communicate to students the benefits of providing such data.

The Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) and the higher education sector in general draw on a range of support and best practice guidance particularly from [Advance HE](#) in developing its approach to collecting (and using) equality data.<sup>6</sup> This is an efficient way for organisations to capitalise on external expertise.

The OU was the first university in Scotland to introduce a policy for the [ethical use of student data for learning analytics](#). The organisation uses learning analytics in a systematic way to improve and personalise support to students. The learning analytics approach involves using statistical analysis and modelling of (past) personal data (including equality data) provided by students to monitor current student progress, and to identify early warning signs that an individual student may require particular additional assistance or support. The learning analytics approach also uses these data to evaluate teaching and learning design and technology at an aggregate level. The data and insights generated are used to inform improvements to teaching and learning design including improvements to the method of assessing the quality of specific modules.

The OU has used the theoretical framework of intersectionality to highlight the manner in which intersecting forms of inequality – emerging from structural

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<sup>5</sup> Note that 24% of OU students have declared a disability of some kind.

<sup>6</sup> The Higher Education Statistics Agency collects, assures and disseminates data about higher education in the UK on behalf of their statutory customers.

advantages and disadvantages – can shape a person's or a group's experience and impact on their social, economic, and cultural opportunities. This work is at an early stage and is currently used for internal purposes only. One current project for example, is examining the 'degree awarding gap' on an intersectional basis.<sup>7</sup> Specifically, this project is analysing the extent to which disability (and potentially other protected characteristics) amplifies the negative impact of minority ethnic status on the performance of students on particular OU Level 1 modules.

### Impacts of equality data collection

The OU uses the equality data it collects to improve the student experience. This may involve adapting the curriculum, the assessment process, or the delivery of the teaching and often involves specialist alternative formats of module materials and equipment loans. In addition, there are a variety of bursaries, scholarships and grants available from the OU such as the Carers' Bursary which offers students that have caring responsibilities some financial support towards their study costs and the Disabled Veterans' Scholarship Fund which, in addition to providing full fee waivers, offers recipients specialist careers and disability support.

#### Spotlight: Improving career readiness for specific groups of students

The Open University's Careers and Employability Services recently piloted the **Achieving Your Goals** project in Scotland. This initiative collected data – including equality data – to better understand the career and study motivations, career readiness and career support needs of students, and utilised it to proactively engage students with tailored careers information.<sup>8</sup> Aligned with the OU's [Access, Participation and Success Strategy](#), pilot participants were more engaged with study, have improved study outcomes and are more likely to continue their studies than non-participants.

Within the project, the Elevate Career Mentoring Programme was created to offer targeted career coach and external mentoring support to students from all widening participation groups. The students receive up to ten hours support through mentoring and career coaching over the duration of the programme, and are matched with an employer in a sector they aspire to work in, with the aim to connect students into networks they may otherwise not be able to access.

This pilot project has now been extended for student cohorts across the UK.

### Next steps

The OU's recently published [Public Sector Equality Duties 2021–25](#) report sets out plans for how the OU will:

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<sup>7</sup> The 'degree awarding gap' or 'degree attainment gap' refers to the difference in 'top degrees' – a First or 2:1 classification – awarded to different groups of students. The biggest differences are currently found by ethnic background.

<sup>8</sup> The Achieving Your Goals project was shortlisted in the 20/21 AGCAS Awards for Excellence in Supporting Student/Graduate Employability category. [A webcast describing the project is available here.](#)

- Increase its reach into minority ethnic communities and achieve the target agreed in their outcome agreement with the Scottish Funding Council to have at least 5% of undergraduate entrants declaring their ethnicity within 'Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic' categories.
- Decrease the retention (from registration to qualification) gap, the degree award gap, and employment outcomes between Black and White students at the OU. In particular, the OU has set itself a target for its degree award gap to be lower than the higher education sector average.
- Improve outcomes for care-experienced students and carers through for example monitoring their experience and success in relation to educational outcomes, promoting and providing support, and increasing staff awareness and training in relation to these groups.
- Develop data collection / collation to obtain reliable, anonymous monitoring of disclosures of domestic abuse / gender-based violence in student (and staff) cohorts.
- Target the [Young Applicants in Schools Scheme](#) (YASS) on remote and rural areas, and the two most deprived quintiles of the Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation.
- By 2025, oversee a fundamental change to how current Equality Impact Assessment practices are carried out.

The OU will also continue its work to improve understanding of intersectionality and how it effects inequality.

### Contact for further information

Queries and further information in relation to this case study should be directed to: [Scotland-Stats@open.ac.uk](mailto:Scotland-Stats@open.ac.uk)

#### **The Scottish Government Equality Data Improvement Programme**

The Scottish Government launched its [Equality Data Improvement Programme](#) in April 2021. The first phase of the programme, which will run from April 2021 to December 2022, aims to raise awareness across the public sector of why equality data are needed, and how these data can be used to improve policy-making and outcomes.

**Do you have an example of good practice in collecting and using equality data at your organisation that you would like to share?**

Contact the Scottish Government at [social-justice-analysis@gov.scot](mailto:social-justice-analysis@gov.scot)



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