SECTION 5: EXISTING DATA SOURCES IN HIGHER EDUCATION

By the end of this section you will be able to:

- Describe the sources of data which currently exist in higher education.
- Extend your learning, complete the mapping activity of data sources which exist within your institution.
- Apply your learning, review the case study to help you consider a 'real life' example associated to the content of this section.

Where can you find existing data?

Secondary data analysis allows researchers to use **data** which they have not collected themselves but will help answer their research question. It is useful to explore what secondary (existing) sources are available to you before you embark on any new **(primary) data collection**. This could save you time and resources, provide some insight into previous findings, add to your rationale for conducting your project, or provide sources which can eventually be **triangulated**.

The diagram below provides an overview of the type of **research** and **evaluation** that takes place within a higher education institution and examples of existing data sources that may exist (Austen 2018, 2019).

Student learning analytics	▪ student attendance data, VLE use, attainment data
Student surveys	▪ NSS, UKES, PTES, Welcome/Induction Survey, Career Readiness Survey
Student evaluations	▪ module/course/programme evaluations, Student Representatives' feedback
Reflections and pilots	▪ staff reflections on practice, local pedagogic research, module/course/programme reviews
Evaluations of process/impact	▪ impact evaluation of outreach activity, student bursaries, process of finding work experience
Student research	▪ UG and PG research which explores the institution or wider community
Staff research	▪ research contracted by funders or scholarship activity which explores the institution or wider community

When you engage with evidence, you should always ask yourself these critical questions:

WHY? Why was the data collected? The reason may be different to your own line of inquiry and this may create bias that you will need to acknowledge.

WHO? Who collected and now stores the data? You will need to explore whether they have permissions to share this with you for your intended purpose.

HOW? How was the data collected? The methodology and the sample will create some parameters for the analysis that you will need to work within.

WHAT? What are the limitations of the data? You will need to assess the inherited limitations of the secondary data source AND the limitations of carrying out your secondary data analysis.

To find out more about some of these data sources, and how they could be used, have a look at:

Intangible assets	QAA Scotland resource by Robertson, Cleaver and Smart (2019) maps 'intangible assets' – not forgetting the things that are important that cannot be easily measured.
Sector data	HESA (Higher Education Statistical Agency): publish data on all aspects of the UK higher education sector
	Office for Students: provide advice and guidance on Teaching Excellence Framework data
	Discover Uni: compares UK higher education course data
Student analytics	JISC: includes guidance and services to explore data collection and analysis
	QAA Scotland webinar by Bart Rientes: The Power of Learning Analytics to Unpack Learning and Teaching: A Critical Perspective
Student Survey Data	HE Data Landscape Tool: 13 individual data guides on key data sources, collections and applications
	QAA Scotland webinar by Alex Buckley: Making Sense of Surveys

It will take some time to find out what data already exists within institutions, so build this into your project planning. If you are planning a project, complete the typology below and map out the existing data sources in your area of interest.

If you are not yet working on a project, choose a topic of interest or work through the illustrative example below:

Research question: **Is the current academic timetable supporting a positive learning experience for students on Nursing courses?**

Student learning analytics	
Student surveys	▪ NSS Q16: “The timetable works efficiently for me” filter for BSC Nursing (Adult), BSC Nursing (Child)
Student evaluations	
Reflections and pilots	
Evaluations of process/impact	
Student research	
Staff research	

Finding new secondary sources: thinking outside the (NSS) box

You should give some thought to where you might find useful evidence. Can you be creative, gather insightful data and save some time and resource?

To make the most of the range of evidence available to you, you will need to think outside of the (NSS) box.

Sometimes data and evidence already exists…but it’s not called data, or it hasn’t been analysed in a way that allows you to easily add to your evidence base, or it isn’t what you (or colleagues) would usually engage with.

For example, **qualitative** comments from documentary sources (such as a recent course or programme review) will not have been collected for research purposes but can be rich secondary sources of data if you can find a way to gather and sort the information you need.

Always check you have permission for **analysis**. Section 4 discusses ethical considerations in more detail.

Consider the following examples and suggested further reading:

Data type	Such as...	Useful resources
Social media commentary	Student comments posted on Twitter or Instagram	Townsend L & Wallace, C University of Aberdeen: Social Media Research: A Guide to Ethics
Official documents	Minutes of meetings (eg staff/student committees led by Student Representatives, Students' Association forums) or external examiner reports	Coffey, A (2014) Analysing Documents in The SAGE Handbook of Qualitative Data Analysis
Student-led Teaching Award nominations	Student-led award nominations for teaching excellence or support	Lubicz-Nawrocka & Bunting (2019) Student perceptions of teaching excellence: an analysis of student-led teaching award nomination data, Teaching in Higher Education, 24:1, pp63-80 QAA Scotland, Feedback from Assessment project: Student-Led Teaching Award Nomination Data
Assessment	Using student assessment grades to show learning gain (impact)	Higher Education Pedagogies Journal, Learning Gain in Higher Education (2018, 3:1)

What other information could you access and use as data within your institution? (Make sure you ask yourself the 'Why? Who? How? What?' questions above for these new secondary sources of data.)

You may decide that your **analysis** of these secondary sources provides enough evidence for decision making...

But you may now realise that more data is required to explore an area in detail or to access voices within the populations which are not currently represented. Section 6 discusses collecting new data.

5.1 Evidence Essentials Five

There is a vast amount of data available that could help explore almost any area of higher education. Sometimes this data landscape can be overwhelming. Start any project with a set of clear aims and objectives and a question that you want to answer. Ask yourself 'What do I want to find out about this chosen area?' Then ask critical questions of your proposed data sources.

5.2 Case Study: Existing data sources

To apply your learning, review the case study below and answer the questions to help you consider a 'real life' example associated to the content of this section.

Madison – Business Planning Officer, University of Datadwelling

Madison has been identified as a key project worker to support data requirements underpinning the University of Datadwelling Business School review of the MA in Human Relations Management.

Principally, the School wants to move from a taught on-site delivery mode (which is struggling to recruit) to distance learning (DL) delivery in the space of an academic year. The rationale being that it will be much more financially viable to do so, especially as a corporate DL private provider is being brought in as part of a managed partnership approach.

The Project Team has already outlined key objectives relating to financial outcomes, staffing costs and marketing process. It is now turning its attention to student experience. The Dean and School Business Review Manager, both of whom are qualitative researchers by background, meet with Madison, who is briefed and given an outline of the following data processes which they expect the Business Planning Office to support, involving:

- Examining perceptions of existing students about moving to full DL delivery.
- Doing a comparative analysis with one other University, which they feel can be facilitated easily due to the Dean's previous employment links with the HEI concerned.
- Obtaining perceptions of the DL private provider students, to be collated as part of evaluation materials already gathered by the provider.

Madison is uncomfortable with this approach for several reasons but feels wary of making suggestions for improving the proposed data collection processes. The meeting closes with agreement that Madison will coordinate the evidence-gathering process as outlined. The misgivings remain unexplored.

Case Study Using Evidence in Higher Education

Consider the following questions and then see if you can reconstruct this case to have some improved outcomes for Madison. There is an alternative, refashioned version in Appendix A which provides one approach to producing an evidence informed enhancement of this situation. Before accessing this alternative, see if you can do any better.

- What are your immediate thoughts about the case study situation? Why does Madison feel uncomfortable with the suggested approach?
- Can you identify any further steps Madison could have taken to prepare for this meeting more effectively?
- What existing data sources could Madison have brought to the meeting in order to influence the Dean and Business Review Manager?
- How can Madison learn from this experience and what are the pressing actions that need to be given urgent attention?

Notes

References and Further Reading

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Digital glossary for this section

Analysis	Primary data	Secondary data
Data	Qualititive	Triangulation
Evaluation	Research	