By the end of this section you will be able to make decisions about the most appropriate data collection method for your project.

To extend your learning, explore ‘what else could you do?’ by doing your own research on alternatives to surveys and focus groups.

To apply your learning, review the case study to help you consider a ‘real life’ example associated to the content of this section.

The research process

Section 4 of this Guide discusses thinking critically about: rationale; research questions; governance; ethics; strategy and design. Section 5 introduces secondary data analysis which adopts the methodology and data collection used by others and covered data from a variety of secondary sources. This section focuses on designing new tools (research instruments) to collect and analyse new primary data.

In Section 3 we suggest that data hierarchies exist in higher education. Some types of data carry more weight than others and are more likely to be used to inform decision making. As data is generated from a method, it follows that certain methods are privileged over others and used more often. There are good reasons for using a method with known strengths; size and reach within a cross section of the student population at a single point in time will mean that a survey method, using a questionnaire as the research instrument, will be a good choice. A survey can provide quantitative and qualitative data derived from closed and open questions. Alternatively, focus groups can provide detailed qualitative data on a specific topic area. The researcher is able to analyse the spoken words and also reflect on social interactions, body language and group dynamics, and how any consensus is reached (or not).
Question mapping

It is important that any questions constructed by the researcher (for example, in a questionnaire or a focus group schedule) are based on a clear rationale AND linked to research aims/objectives and research questions. This will create a logical process from analysis to synthesis once the data has been collected.

Objective
To explore the factors which affect responses to student mental health by academic staff

Example questionnaire questions
Q2. Please state your job title ___
Q3 How long have you been in your current job? __years __months
Q10 How strongly do you agree with the following statements 1= strongly disagree and 5 = strongly agree):
“I am not trained to support student mental health”
“I know how to signpost students to the mental health services they need”

Rationale
Research conducted in 2018 for Student Minds indicated that academics are struggling to respond effectively to student mental health (Hughes et al. 2018).
There have been no previous studies of this nature at this institution and an increase in student suicide during the last academic year.

Research questions
What factors are preventing an effective response to student mental health by academic staff?
What factors are supporting an effective response to student mental health by academic staff?
If you choose to do a survey with students or staff, then...

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Survey Do</th>
<th>Survey Don’t</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Use simple language and question construction</td>
<td>Avoid asking ambiguous, leading or double-barrelled questions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Pilot</strong> your survey to see how long it takes to complete, and whether the questions make sense and are in a logical order</td>
<td>Optimum survey length is 13 minutes to complete. Don’t include too many questions or questions that are too complicated to answer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Make the survey easy to access (including for mobile devices if online)</td>
<td>Access links to anonymity. Don’t create a generalised/open link if you want to track respondents from existing data or send personalised reminders to encourage completion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vary questions types to include open (qualitative data) and closed (quantitative data) questions</td>
<td>Remember to plan for how all questions will be analysed. Don’t add questions without a clear rationale</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Promote the survey via known contracts/trusted sources to increase your response rate</td>
<td><strong>Survey fatigue</strong> is an important consideration. Don’t plan a survey without understanding your sample and their involvement in other data collection</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

You could use a Survey Research Design Checklist when designing your student surveys, such as [https://blogs.shu.ac.uk/steer/files/2018/09/SRDC.pdf](https://blogs.shu.ac.uk/steer/files/2018/09/SRDC.pdf)

If you choose to do a focus group with students or staff, then...

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Focus Group Do</th>
<th>Focus Group Don’t</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Create a comfortable and welcoming environment for the data collection</td>
<td>The role of the moderator is important. Don’t underestimate the skill required to encourage participation and deal with uncomfortable situations such as disagreement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Use a focus group to explore views and opinions AND how the group interacts during the discussion</td>
<td>An audio transcript can provide evidence of spoken interactions. Don’t ignore visual aspects such as participant body language when reacting to silences or dominant voices. Making reflective notes during or directly after the session will help</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Make the data collection engaging. Consider an activity (making lists, ranking/rating, storytelling, and game playing) to help generate discussion</td>
<td>Testing your focus group activity in your research environment will allow you to develop your confidence as a moderator. Don’t assume that a pilot is unnecessary, so build this time into your project plan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Limit the number of participants to fewer than 10. Be prepared to adapt your activity if you have fewer than expected so the session is still engaging</td>
<td>Focus groups may last longer than an interview with a single respondent because there are multiple voices in the discussion. Don’t plan for any less than an hour in length</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Be strategic about who you invite to your focus group. Do you want a group with similar or divergent views? How will you access them?</td>
<td>Trust is a crucial element of a successful focus group. Don’t invite participants that will unsettle others and close down discussions. Consider any power dynamics and conflicts of interest</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Plan your focus group carefully. Think through different ways of engaging your participants. There are some ideas for engaging focus groups at: https://blogs.shu.ac.uk/steer/2019/05/01/thinking-pedagogically-about-qualitative-research-in-he/

Survey and focus groups are useful approaches, but what else could you do? Other research methods that are well suited to research in higher education include:

- **Interviews**
  - ...qualitative data collected from discussions with individual participants using a schedule of questions. Participant responses are interpreted through analysis.

- **Observations**
  - ...direct eye witness accounts of behaviour and activity as it happens. Researchers can either observe as a participant or a non-participant.

- **Documentary analysis**
  - ...qualitative comments from documentary sources will not 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 for analysis. Always check you have permission for analysis.

- **Action research**
  - ...links research with practice such that the researcher constructs a process of change for practitioners and collects data through interviews or observations.

- **Experimental research/evaluation**
  - ...creates controlled conditions such that cause and effect can be explored.
Incentives are unethical and will add bias to the data

Students will participate in the project if it is important to them

Incentives recognise that students’ time is valued

Few students will participate without an incentive

Without incentivised participation, there will be no data to act upon

Incentives recognise that students’ time is valued

Choose what is the most appropriate for your data collection. Be honest about the use of incentives in any reporting, including your rationale and acknowledgement of any associated limitations. Head (2009) explores this in more detail and suggests that practical, methodological and ethical issues need to be considered before offering incentives, especially payment to research participants.

Evidence Essentials Six

A good grasp of how the data has been generated (either by yourself or others) will allow you to think critically about how it can be used within an evidence base. Adopting a mixed methods approach will allow for the strengths of one method to compensate for any limitations in another.
**Blake, Student Research Officer at University of Enlightenment**

Blake works as a Student Research Officer for the Students’ Association at the University of Enlightenment. The role involves collecting and producing data about students’ experiences at Enlightenment and using findings to lobby for change.

According to Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) data, Enlightenment has a large degree awarding gap between white students and those from a Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic (BAME) background, with BAME students being 25% less likely to achieve an upper second-class degree, or higher, than their white counterparts. This is completely out of kilter with the rest of the Scottish sector.

Blake has been asked to find out about BAME student’s attitudes and beliefs about this difference and therefore constructs a Likert-scale survey to collect data which can then be used to inform the wider evidence-base at Enlightenment.

The survey consists of 30 questions with an additional open-ended space at the end for further free text comments. It is administered by a general email link to the whole student population and launched in the first week of the second semester and remains open for four weeks.

Despite a social media campaign and some incentives (including a free drink at the Student Union and entry into a prize draw to win a laptop) the response rate is very low, with a final rate of 1.7% across the whole student population.

Blake also receives some complaints from students about a range of matters underpinning the survey. These include: a perception that the survey questions are too crude and leading; that students have already recently completed something of a similar nature for the Race Equality Charter; due to the survey link going out generally, students not identifying from a BAME background complain they are unsure of whether to complete the survey too; the local Association’s BAME Forum expresses annoyance that its members were not included in the survey design from the outset. Blake is also summoned by the University’s Head of Ethics to find out why the survey does not appear to have formal ethical clearance.

Due to these reservations, the low response rate and the fact that reporting any findings will be severely restricted due to the lack of ethical approval, Blake decides to withdraw the survey and offers apologies to all affected.

Blake still thinks that it is a real pity that an opportunity has been missed to examine students’ perspectives of why the awarding gap remains at Enlightenment. A relatively straightforward student survey was seen to be the most obvious data collection vehicle, so Blake is stumped as to how to take this forward more effectively by any alternative means.
Consider the following questions and then see if you can reconstruct this case to have some improved outcomes for Blake. 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.

Case Study Critique: Existing Evidence

- What are your immediate thoughts about this case study? Why does Blake feel unsure about how to take this work forward?
- How could Blake have prepared more effectively when planning this data collection process?
- What are Blake’s assumptions about a) the use of a survey as the data collection tool of choice in this context? and b) the level of ethical scrutiny, especially when linked to sensitive areas of investigation?
- What could Blake have done instead, in order to contribute more constructively to gaining insights into BAME students' attitudes and beliefs about the degree awarding difference?
References and Further Reading


ScotCen Social Research that works for society website www.scotcen.org.uk

Social Research Association (SRA) website http://the-sra.org.uk

STEER (Student Engagement, Evaluation and Research) (2019) Digital Storytelling @ SHU https://blogs.shu.ac.uk/steer/digital-storytelling-shu/?doing_wp_cron=1538925861.0197610855102539062500


Digital glossary for this section

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Analysis</th>
<th>Pilot</th>
<th>Survey Fatigue</th>
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<td>Questions</td>
<td>Synthesis</td>
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<td>Data</td>
<td>Research</td>
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<tr>
<td>Method</td>
<td>Response Rate</td>
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