

Automated data capture for the Destinations of Leavers from Higher Education Survey



The Open University (OU) admitted its first students in 1971, and within a short space of time established itself as the UK's largest university with over 200,000 students and customers. The OU represents a staggering 31% of all part-time degree level students in the UK and approximately 26,000 students are studying OU courses throughout Europe and across the world.

The challenge

The Higher Education Statistics Authority (HESA) is the authoritative point of reference for educational information and twice a year it requires every higher education institution in the UK to conduct a DLHE (Destinations of Leavers from Higher Education) Survey, formerly known as 'FDS'. This survey represents a snapshot of graduate activities six months after completion of their course and is conducted every January and April. In line within the legal framework in which HESA operates, the survey requires an 80% response rate from graduates to ensure the Statistics Agency receive a comprehensive and representative sample of results throughout the UK.



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With a huge number of graduates and complex data collection requirements, the OU recognised that the logistics of carrying out this survey was going to put a huge pressure on its administrative resource. Contacting and collecting data from 12,000 students after they had finished their courses was going to take a great deal of time, planning and attention, something which the OU simply could not achieve in the challenging timeframe set out by HESA, so it decided to seek a supplier who it could trust and outsource the entire project.

The solution

When it came to choosing a supplier to collect and capture the survey data, the OU invited a tender from DRS, a locally based company with a dependable reputation in complex data capture projects. DRS specialises in the development and manufacture of data capture technologies and solutions. Designed to capture high volume, time-critical and complex data for organisations throughout the world, DRS has been at the forefront of this sophisticated technology for over three decades.

Extensive experience

Cementing a strong existing relationship, the OU asked DRS to offer a proposal on the most appropriate application of data capture to undertake the DLHE project. Impressed by the breadth and capability of service, as well as the extensive experience demonstrated in providing data capture for other higher education establishments, DRS offered the most comprehensive range of solutions to adhere to the strict regulations set out by HESA and was chosen to conduct the survey and deliver the results.

Due to the highly specialist nature of the DLHE questionnaire and the high level of accuracy which was required to process and electronically capture the data, it was necessary for DRS to overprint the existing A3 size standard HESA forms with a number of features. In addition to the name and address, barcodes were required along with a student ID number and a PIN number to allow students to log into a web version of the questionnaire so they could also respond electronically, which in itself was powered by a secure back-end database developed by DRS.

Fast, accurate and secure data capture

Data collection

DRS has refined the model for data collection with the aim of optimising capture of the greatest amount of data in the cheapest possible way. Phase 1 of the project was to email graduates for whom the University have personal email addresses making them aware of the survey and the fact that they would be receiving a letter about the survey in the next few days. The email contained a hyperlink to a web site with an electronic version of the survey. The letter contained the student ID number and personal PIN which enabled graduates to access the web site as well as an overprinted form and reply paid envelope. DRS followed this to people who had not responded to date with a reminder postcard.

For Phase 2, the final stage of chasing leavers who had not yet responded, DRS trained a qualified team of interviewers using Computer Assisted Telephone Interviewing (CATI) techniques. Interviewers contacted leavers during the early evening or weekend to complete a telephone version of the survey.

Bespoke software

Once all of the survey forms had been returned to the DRS Bureau facility and collated with web and telephone responses, they were processed through a range of DRS Optical Mark Readers and Intelligent Character Recognition technology, utilising sophisticated and unique data validation routines to electronically capture the survey data.

In order to meet HESA regulations all the questions needed to be completed and certain answers had to be categorised using Standard Industrial Classification (SIC) and Standard Occupational Classification (SOC). A significant portion of DRS development time was allocated to the design of a bespoke software application, which would both 'search and suggest' possible codes, and also provide a drill-down type interface. Combining this with special training for a dedicated team of DRS personnel ensured that this important aspect of the data management was carried out consistently, and within the tight timescales as stipulated by HESA.

The very nature of the DLHE survey denotes that all graduates need to be contacted and followed up. However graduates tend to move on very quickly into a variety of occupations, higher education establishments or simply go traveling and consequently become difficult to track. DRS was able to collect the data for the OU DLHE survey and deliver the results quickly, accurately and securely ahead of schedule.



"Obtaining the data for the DLHE survey was always going to be a challenging job, but the DRS team exceeded our expectations and we were able to deliver accurate results fast. We will definitely be using its services in the future."

*Beverley Midwood
The Open University*

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