

Appendix 2

Technical report: methodology

Sample

1 The sample for the postal survey was divided into two groups; full-time students and part-time students.

Full-time sample

2 The sample of full-time students consisted of students who had previously taken part in a study conducted by PSI into student income and expenditure²⁵ during the 1995/96 academic year, who had agreed to take part in further research, and had provided a long-term contact address (nine in ten of those interviewed for the study). The study involved interviewing a nationally representative random sample of undergraduates. In total, 1,971 interviews were achieved. The process of getting a random sample of students from a stratified sample of 73 higher education establishments had proved a very long and time-consuming exercise, although it had yielded a high-quality sample. For the current survey, we therefore decided to use the sample of students who had taken part in the previous survey, as they would form a nationally representative sample.

3 Students on PGCE courses, students who had been in their final year at the time of the student-income study, and those who had declined to take part in further research were removed from the original 1,971 leaving a sample of 1,066 students to be contacted in this study. The sample did not include any first year students.²⁶ It was decided not to recruit any additional first-year students because of the timing of the survey. First-year students would have been so for only about a month by the time they received the questionnaire and would not be in a position to answer detailed questions on their experiences of higher education.

Part-time sample

4 NCIHE wanted to look closely at the experiences and expectations of part-time students in higher education. The addition of part-time students would also increase the number of mature students and students studying for sub-degrees due to the substantial overlap between these groups. Part-time students are unevenly distributed across higher educational institutions; it was decided, therefore, to draw the sample from a relatively small number of institutions with a high share of part-time students, so that the sample would represent a substantial share of all part-time students. Selection of the institutions was made with reference to DfEE unpublished statistics, and the resulting institutions matched with those in PSI's existing sample of 73, to check for overlaps. Ten out of the eleven institutions from which the student sample was taken had participated in PSI's previous student-finances study and they were selected because of their high proportion of part-time students. In six of these institutions, part-time students constituted 20 per cent or more

of the total student population; in four institutions this figure was 10 per cent or more. Only one of the institutions had below 10 per cent part-time students. The total number of part-time students at these institutions constituted 12.5 per cent of all UK part-time undergraduates.

5 To these ten was added Birkbeck College, the institution with the largest proportion of part-time students (99.7%).

6 While recognising that a high proportion of part-time students attend '1992 universities' and other higher education institutions, the sample also seeks to be representative of 'pre-1992 universities'. From the eleven institutions selected, four are 'pre-1992' and seven are '1992' higher education institutions.

7 All eleven institutions agreed to provide the names and addresses of 100 part-time students for use in the sample. PSI liaised directly with the institution to ensure that each selected a random sample of part-time students attending their institution. In total, 1,094 part-time students were included in the sample.

Questionnaire

8 The questionnaire for the study was developed by PSI in consultation with NCIHE. The same questionnaire was used for the full and part-time samples. However, the questionnaire for part-timers contained some additional classification questions, covering key information which we had already collected from the full-time students in PSI's previous study. The questionnaire was designed to be as short as possible, and easy to complete to help boost the response rate.

9 A draft of the questionnaire was piloted among undergraduates at the University of Bath on 24 October 1996, in both a class situation, and on a one-to-one basis. The questionnaire was modified in the light of findings from the pilot.

Fieldwork

10 The fieldwork was undertaken by BMRB on behalf of PSI. Questionnaires were mailed to respondents in the week commencing 11 November 1996, along with a letter from PSI and a reply-paid envelope addressed to BMRB. The letters were personalised in order to encourage response. The questionnaires were sent to full-time students' permanent address and so the envelopes were overprinted with a red message, asking for the letter to be forwarded to their term-time address. For part-time students, the questionnaires were sent to the address provided by their institution.

11 A reminder was sent to all those who had not replied after two weeks, in the week commencing 25 November 1996. This reminder letter also enclosed a further copy of the questionnaire and a reply-paid envelope in case the original documents had been mislaid. During the week commencing 9 December 1996, one further reminder letter and questionnaire was sent, in the hope of getting replies from those who had only received the questionnaire when they returned home at the end of term.

Response

12 Table 1 below shows response for both the full-time and part-time samples.

Table 1 – Questionnaire response: full-time and part-time students
(percentages in brackets)

	Full-time Issued sample: 1,066	Part-time Issued sample: 1,094
Ineligible respondents	4 (%)	135 (12)
Eligible base	1,062 (100)	959 (100)
Eligible respondents	697 (66)	573 (60)

Source: All samples derived

13 As Table 1 shows, some respondents, particularly in the part-time sample, had to be excluded because they were first years (95), or full-time students (32), or taking a Masters course (9) or had enrolled on a one-year course (37). Four students were excluded from the full-time sample as they had transferred to part-time courses.

14 A good response rate was achieved with both samples. The table shows that there was little difference between the response rates received from the full-time and the part-time samples. We had expected to obtain a higher response from full-time students, because they had co-operated with research in the past and had said that they would be willing to help again, whereas the part-time sample were 'cold' contacts. Response may have been lower amongst full-time students than it could have been because we were reliant on the questionnaires being forwarded to the addressee.

Analysis

15 Returned questionnaires were manually edited and coded prior to data entry. Codeframes were drawn up by the research team, and approved by PSI before coding began. Once coding was completed, researchers looked again at all the answers that had not been coded and, where appropriate, drew up new codes for each question. The data were then subjected to a comprehensive computer edit, with inconsistencies resolved with reference to the original questionnaires when necessary. Data were then produced for each of the samples and passed to PSI to produce full tabulations. PSI removed from the data the students who did not fit the criteria of the study (ineligible respondents as shown in Table 1) before producing the tabulations.

Weighting of the part-time sample

16 The weighting which reconciled the part-time sample with the full-time sample was made up of three parts:

- Firstly, a weight (wt1) was given to each one of the 11 institutions supplying part-time students, to reflect the differential sampling proportions for each. For each institution, 100 part-timers were drawn from the total of part-time students attending the institution.
- Second, a weight (wt2) was given to each institution to reflect its relative share of part-timers amongst all 73 institutions approached for the full-time sample.
- Third, a weight (wt3) was given to each institution to compensate for the

elimination of those inadvertently included but who were out-of-scope cases (mainly first-years) and who had been eliminated from the analysis.

17 The weight for each of the institutions supplying part-time students was thus $wt1 * wt2 * wt3$. The mean value was 0.76, the minimum 0.13 and the maximum 2.32. The implicit weight for the students from the main sample was 1.

18 The effect of the weighting was to reduce the size of the part-time sample from 573 to 390, thus forming an overall sample size of 1,087 weighted respondents.

19 Data on full and part-time students numbers were taken from HESA published statistics.