

University & Beyond 2008: Research Methodology

This is a summary of the research methodology employed for the 2008 University & Beyond (U&B) survey undertaken by Graduate Careers Australia (GCA). The *University & Beyond 2008* research report is available for purchase from www.graduatecareers.com.au.

Instrument design and validation

The initial U&B question set was based on a comprehensive review of literature concerning higher education students' perceptions and expectations of life after university. Based on the findings from this literature review, and with input from stakeholders in the university sector, general themes were identified which allowed for the development of the initial question set. It was also determined at this stage that not all questions would be applicable to all respondents due to differences in work and life stages, so this was reflected in the design of the final questionnaire.

The final question set was thoroughly reviewed and revised at GCA and was also subject to a review, either whole or in part, by a number of bodies including the Higher Education Career Service Unit in the UK, the U&B Advisory Committee, representatives from university careers services, university planning and statistics offices, graduate recruiters and employers, and an independent research company specialising in educational research. Feedback was also obtained from individuals within the respondent population through a series of qualitative focus groups.

The general themes covered in the questionnaire were:

- Your Course
- Your University
- Generic Employability Skills
- Current and Post-Graduation Employment and Plans
- Current and Post-Graduation Expectations
- About You

Survey Administration and Promotion

The online survey instrument, which was programmed and hosted by a commercial provider, was accessed via a link on a dedicated U&B website: www.universityandbeyond.com.au. The primary reason for hosting this survey on a dedicated website was to emphasise to students that the survey was independent of their respective university, thus minimising the potential for response bias and institutional survey fatigue. As well as containing the link to the online survey, the website contained detailed information regarding the U&B survey and GCA, a privacy policy, and the legal terms and conditions that governed the use of incentives in this survey. The survey incentives consisted of a prize draw for a \$4,000 major prize, along with a number of other major and minor prizes.

A number of methods were used by GCA to promote the survey to students, including a postcard campaign targeted at student frequented venues including university campuses, restaurants and cafés across Australia. GCA also promoted this survey through its websites and student publications. The survey was actively promoted by participating universities through emails to their students, posters and postcards distributed around campus, and links on their respective websites. In order to encourage student participation, all promotional materials for U&B 2008 reinforced the potential value of the survey to students, business and universities, and also promoted the fact that participants had the chance to win one of several major prizes.

Population Specifications

The population of interest for this research was defined as all students currently enrolled in a higher education institution in Australia, which consisted of approximately 940,000 students at the time of the survey (DEEWR 2008). In sections of the research report where student expectations from U&B are compared against actual graduate outcomes from the Australian Graduate Survey, the findings are based on a sub-population of students who had been studying for at least two years and were due to complete their qualification within 18 months of the survey date.

All Australian higher education institutions were actively invited to participate in the project. Twelve universities who participated in the U&B 2007 actively participated again in 2008, with seven institutions participating for the first time in 2008. This gave the research a target student population of approximately 495,000 students within 19 universities (DEEWR 2008).

All institutions that were invited to participate in the research were provided with a Code of Practice governing the use and disclosure of survey outcomes.

Response and weighting

The fieldwork component of U&B 2008 ran for a total of 13 weeks, from 28 April to 25 July 2008. In total, 28,147 responses were received during this period, representing a decline in responses of approximately 13 per cent when compared with U&B 2007. The survey data file was cleaned to remove duplicate responses using a combination of contact data fields as identifiers. Records deemed to be invalid or unusable were also removed from the data file. As a result of this cleaning, 646 records were removed leaving 27,501 valid responses. Prior to the release of any survey data, the data file was de-identified to remove any personal information that could allow for individual respondents to be identified.

When compared to the composition of the Australian higher education student population, the 2008 U&B survey data was found to be unrepresentative in a number of key areas (particularly gender, age, field of education and residency status). In order to correct this, the survey dataset was statistically weighted using a post-stratification weighting methodology¹ in order to enhance its representativeness. All proportions presented in the *University & Beyond 2008* research report are based on weighted data, although unweighted counts (*n*) are presented. A comparison of the weighted 2008 U&B data, the 2007 U&B data and the benchmark 2006 Australian higher education student population is presented in Table 1 on the following page.

References

DEEWR, 2008. *Students 2007 [full year]: selected higher education statistics* [online]. Canberra: Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations (DEEWR). Available from: www.deewr.gov.au [Accessed 2008].

DEST, 2007. *Student Enrolments, 2006* [online]. Canberra: Department of Education, Science and Training (DEST). Available from: www.deewr.gov.au [Accessed 2008].

GCA, 2008. *University & Beyond 2007*. Melbourne: Graduate Careers Australia.

¹ Sampling weights for each sub-cohort (in this case stratified by age, gender, residency, enrolment type and field of education) were derived by calculating the ratio of each sample sub-cohort to the corresponding sub-cohort in the benchmark population (DEST 2007). These sampling weights were then applied to each respective sample sub-cohort using the SPSS 15.0 *Weight cases* procedure.

Table 1: Respondent and population characteristics, all students, University & Beyond 2008 (%)*

	University & Beyond 2008 [€]	University & Beyond 2007 [¥]	Student Population, 2006 [†]
Male	45.3	32.8	45.0
Female	54.7	67.2	55.0
19 or less	22.4	17.4	23.3
20 to 24	38.3	46.1	38.7
25 to 29	15.8	15.4	13.9
30 plus	23.5	21.2	24.0
Agriculture, Environmental and Related Studies	1.7	1.5	1.5
Architecture and Building	1.4	1.4	2.1
Creative Arts	5.5	6.0	6.4
Education	9.1	10.7	9.5
Engineering and Related Technologies	8.6	7.8	6.5
Food, Hospitality and Personal Services	0.0	0.0	0.1
Health	13.2	17.8	12.3
Information Technology	5.6	5.2	4.7
Management and Commerce	27.8	20.8	28.5
Mixed Field Programmes	0.0	0.0	0.3
Natural and Physical Sciences	5.8	6.0	7.2
Society and Culture	21.2	22.8	20.9
Domestic	75.3	87.3	73.5
International	24.7	12.7	26.5
Undergraduate	72.7	77.7	72.1
Postgraduate	27.3	22.3	27.9
Internal (on campus)	77.2	82.0	80.4
External (distance or online)	16.0	11.4	12.7
Mixed mode (internal and external)	6.7	6.6	6.9
Full time	71.4	79.5	68.0
Part time	28.6	20.5	32.0
* Totals may not add up to 100.0 per cent due to rounding. [€] Data has been statistically weighted. [¥] GCA 2008 [†] DEST 2007			