



**Vocational degrees and employment outcomes**  
**Response from the Chartered Association of Business Schools**

**5 March 2018**

**HEFCE's original request for feedback is available at:**

<http://www.hefce.ac.uk/news/newsarchive/2018/Name,116506,en.html>

1. The Chartered ABS and its members are supportive of efforts to increase the information available to prospective students when selecting their degree subject. Future employment outcomes are a key driver in this choice and those joining Higher Education would understandably value such information before deciding on how to invest in their future career. **From our perspective, however, any measure of future employment outcomes must not lead to students making unjustified generalisations about the attractiveness of a particular field.** We therefore have several concerns about the potential for the Occupation-Subject Concentration Ratio (OSCR) to give a misleading impression about the likely career outcomes for individual subjects.
2. The HEFCE report on '*Vocational degrees and employment outcomes*' acknowledges that there are several different ways in which a qualification could be considered 'vocational' and that all of the HE subject areas included in the study are, to some extent, vocational. **There is no universally accepted definition of vocational education, and in its broadest sense could be considered as referring to a range of learning experiences which are relevant to the world of work,** including those obtained from HE qualifications.
3. **By equating the OSCR measure with the term 'vocational', prospective students may be given the misleading impression that subjects considered 'less vocational' according to the measure do not adequately equip graduates with the skills necessary to embark upon a successful workplace career.** We would argue that in the strictest sense the OSCR is actually measuring how narrow a career path is for a graduate in a specific subject rather than how 'vocational' that particular field is, as almost all HE qualifications can be considered vocational in the sense of training individuals for the workplace.
4. Indeed, whilst the paper presents evidence that a higher OSCR has a positive effect on the predicted probability of a graduate being in highly skilled employment, the results also show that **even for subjects with a relatively low OSCR the probability of being in highly skilled employment remains very high.** For example, the OSCR for Business Studies places it at the lower end of the range for the subjects included in the analysis, yet graduates in the subject still have a 92% probability of entering highly skilled employment after graduation. There are also several subjects, including Physics, that have a relatively low OSCR but whose graduates on average earn more than those from other subjects that have a higher OSCR (e.g. Architecture). It is important therefore that the OSCR measure does not lead to the erroneous belief that graduates in subjects with lower OSCRs are less likely to enter highly skilled employment or achieve above average earnings.
5. In addition to ensuring that the OSCR measure is not incorrectly interpreted as being reflective of the probability of enjoying a successful career after graduating in a particular field, we would strongly advise that, **if the measure is to be formally rolled-out, the results are presented at a sufficiently granular level as to enable accurate opinions to be formed.** For example, within the broad subject group of 'Business and Management' there are significant variations in the OSCRs for the constituent subjects, which means it is important

that scores are presented at the level of narrow subject areas, to reduce the risk of potential students making sweeping generalisations about the career path of a narrow subject based only on the score for the broad subject group.

6. If HEFCE intends to formally introduce the OSCR measure we would strongly advise that it gives careful consideration as to how the results are communicated and the overall objectives that it seeks to achieve through its publication. **We also have a number of issues with the methodology used to construct the OSCR and would ask that HEFCE considers revising it to consider graduates' employment outcomes over a longer period.** The current methodology for the OSCR is based on the DLHE survey which measures outcomes for graduates six months after leaving higher education. For some fields, however, six months is too short a time frame in which to assess the employment outcomes of graduates as career progression may take longer. With the introduction of the new DLHE survey at the end of 2018 – where graduates will be surveyed 15 months after leaving HE – will the OSCR measure change to incorporate data on employment outcomes over this timescale?
7. **An evaluation which considers outcomes two years after leaving higher education may generate very different results,** with some subjects recording higher OSCRs if career outcomes are considered over a longer period. For this reason, HEFCE should consider alternative methodologies which could either use the DFE Longitudinal Education Outcomes (LEO) data or the longitudinal version of the DLHE survey. HEFCE should consider other methods for evaluating the validity of the OSCR methodology, including that proposed in the report in which the existing methodology would be reversed by analysing the subject backgrounds of graduates employed in specific occupations. It may also be worth developing a measure for employment outcomes of graduates undertaking post-graduate study immediately after their first degree has been completed.
8. **The usefulness of the OSCR measure for prospective students could be enhanced if it incorporated evidence as to whether there exists any trade-off between specific and general skills,** in which graduates in subjects with high OSCRs achieve better employment outcomes in the short-term but plateau over the longer-term. The absence of such data is a significant limitation to the OSCR, as there is no indication as to the likely employment outcomes of graduates over a range of timeframes based upon the OSCR for their chosen subject. **Taken in isolation, the measure could result in prospective students choosing a degree subject based on the probability of achieving employment outcomes as quickly as possible.** Moreover, we are concerned that it could lead to prospective students 'narrowing down' their career paths too early in the belief that subjects with high OSCRs represent a better prospect in the labour market.
9. The Chartered ABS is supportive of measures to provide prospective students with comprehensive information about HE qualifications and the various career paths that could result from a specific subject choice. **We strongly urge that any information published with the purpose of informing degree choices is constructed and communicated in a manner that does not result in confusion, misleading conclusions or sweeping generalisations.** As it currently stands we are not satisfied that the OSCR meets these standards and request that HEFCE reconsiders both its intended purpose and methodology.

*The Chartered Association of Business Schools is the membership body of the UK's business schools and represents around 120 business schools and higher education providers, as well as affiliate stakeholders, corporate members and international partners. As the UK's business and management education sector represents 1 in 7 university students it is important that the opinions of our members are heard in relation to any initiative that could influence prospective students' degree choices.*

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