

## Contacting leavers using the telephone

Higher education providers (HEPs) have often found that contacting leavers using the telephone accounts for the majority of responses to DLHE and it is therefore important to establish how best to utilise the method. Telephone surveys also often account for the most significant amount of resource required in both the 'follow-up' phase and the wider DLHE process.

### Preparing a call

Time is often of the essence when you make contact with a leaver as they may well be in a rush or unable to spend a long time on the telephone. Time is also important for the HEP as being able to complete a survey in an efficient and thorough manner will optimise resource and increase the number of calls made in a session. For this reason it is vital that you know your leaver before calling. Having to hand information about whether or not the leaver studied part-time, holds an applicable ITT qualification, or if there are personal issues that might impact on the call is vital to ensure the survey is quick and smooth for both parties.



Note down a profile of the leaver prior to telephoning including relevant information about which sections they must complete and whether there are any disability or personal issues that might require consideration within the call. You might also note down the qualification gained for the leaver as well as the one they were aiming for to flag up potential problem calls.

Finally ensure that you have the right telephone script for the right survey period. Failure to have the correct script is likely to result in the leaver being asked questions about an erroneous census date.



Try to ensure where possible that when calling leavers your phone number does not appear as 'blocked' or 'unknown' on their display – often a result of being routed through a switchboard. Leavers are more likely to take the call where they can see the number (and one with a familiar area code) as opposed to when it is blocked as they will assume it to be a cold call.

### When to call

There are no steadfast rules as to when the best times of day are to call and make contact with leavers; however experience shows that calling outside of standard working hours offers the highest chance of making contact. Whilst some leavers may be contactable during standard working hours often they are in the minority and it is likely that deploying resource at other times will yield better results. If you consider your own working day and the likelihood of you taking a call from an unknown party, this should form the basis of your telephone scheduling. HEPs have reported that calling between 5.30pm and 8.30pm offers the best opportunity to make contact.

Assuming that most working days finish by around 5.30pm you may wish to telephone after this time and before it becomes too late in the evening. What constitutes 'too late' should be based on your own judgement and experience/findings from previous DLHE surveys. Calling at lunch times during the week might also provide an opportunity to make contact.



Logging the time of successful calls will allow you to establish peak or optimum times to call leavers in future surveys. This will in turn help to focus resource and improve efficiency.

Many HEPs employ staff to work on weekends where the likelihood is that the leaver will not be in work or study and more liable to be contactable.

## How to call

When conducting a survey telephonists should be flexible in their approach and ready to be responsive to the calls needs. For example the caller should listen to what is being said by the leaver and how they are saying it and then adapt accordingly – concentrating on getting the core questions answered where the leaver seems in a rush or expand on answers where the leaver is fully engaged.

Consider that the first 30 seconds of the call are likely to be the most important in terms of engaging with the leaver and ensuring they will answer the questions. With this in mind callers should from the outset make clear they are:

- Ringing on behalf of the *HEP* to find out whether the *former student* has found employment and/or further study following completion of their course.
- Information is used both to advise current students about opportunities and also to feed into a national statistical survey conducted each year to see what happens to students upon leaving higher education.
- The information on this form will be used by your HEP and coded information will be sent to the Higher Education Statistics Agency. Further details and contact information are supplied as part of the covering letter.
- They may be contacted again in the future as part of a follow-up survey. This survey will be conducted by a third party and so their details may be passed on to this third party.
- They need to find out what the former student was doing on the census date.



Some HEPs have reported using native speakers (for example Greek students to telephone Greek graduates) to help with non-UK calls.

There is a skill set to making efficient and successful DLHE calls that is built up over time. It is therefore important to try to retain experienced staff who have carried out the telephone surveys before – they will know the pitfalls and best practice for getting hold of the information from difficult calls.



Consider calling leavers in batches of type. For example all of those who studied part-time or on an ITT course so that you ensure that the relevant questions are asked.



At the beginning of the process ensure that all staff have the appropriate permissions on the telephone system to call mobile phone numbers as some switchboards might prevent this.

## Problem calls

From time to time telephonists might encounter problem calls whereby the leaver is unhappy that they have been contacted or with their current employment situation. Training during the DLHE preparation stage is a key factor in ensuring that staff members are able to deal with such calls. Where the leaver is unhappy due to their employment status callers should provide information about the careers service at the HEP and be sympathetic in tone. If the caller is unhappy at being contacted as part of DLHE the issue should not be forced – instead the form should be marked as a refusal with the exclusion from the DLHE Longitudinal Survey box ticked.