FOI and Higher Education: some thoughts

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HE response to post-legislative scrutiny

• Almost a quarter of submissions from HE
• Range of concerns
  – commercial/media requests
  – cost of compliance
  – competitive advantages
  – effect on funding
  – research information
• Some called for HE to be removed altogether
Use of FOI by academics

• Not wide use at present; some see it as inappropriate even (eg Cranfield’s evidence)

• Examples:
  – John Campbell’s (SOAS) evidence to Justice Select Committee
  – PhD students
SOAS experience

• Numbers have risen in last 2-3 years – but still relatively low volumes
• No requests for research data; requests are around finance, human resources, procurement, student statistics
• Most information goes out but can be withheld where necessary (no ICO complaints as yet)
Research Data

• Needs to be looked at case-by-case
• Exemptions, well-argued, provide protection – sections 22, 43, 36
• Limited evidence of need for new exemption
• Would not protect climate change research, tree ring data, etc – covered by Environmental Information Regulations
Should HE be subject to FOI? (1)

- Funding – still significant public funding and public interest

### SOAS income 2010/11

- Tuition Fees: 59%
- Research grants & contracts: 7%
- Endowment & investment income: 1%
- Other income: 9%
- Funding Council grants: 24%

Source: SOAS Annual Review and Financial Statements 2010/11
Should HE be subject to FOI? (2)

• Civic role of universities
  – professional gateway
  – shaping political thought
  – controversial research

• New environment (eg competition) can be catered for in assessment of public interest
Summary

• Universities clearly have concerns about FOI
• Sparcity of evidence to support concerns
• Double-edged sword – academics can use FOI as well
• Calls to remove HE from FOI could cause damage to universities’ reputation