



Social Mobility & Child Poverty Commission

Rt. Hon Alan Milburn
Chair
Social Mobility and Child Poverty Commission
Sanctuary Buildings
First Floor
20 Great Smith St
London
SW1P 3BT

CONTACT@smcpcommission.gsi.gov.uk
www.gov.uk/smcpc

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Dear Heather,

I am writing regarding the proposed changes to the UK Performance Indicators on widening participation announced in HEFCE Circular Letter 17/2015.¹

The Social Mobility and Child Poverty Commission strongly welcomes the decision to introduce new widening participation indicators looking at household income, free school meal eligibility and entrants from schools where few pupils enter higher education. The new indicators have the potential to improve our knowledge about the progress being made in widening access to higher education both by the sector as a whole and by different institutions. They could also help better target programmes aiming to drive further progress.

However, we are concerned that the proposal to stop monitoring and reporting data looking at the socio-economic background of entrants to higher education will prevent the monitoring of an important part of disadvantage. This will reduce the ability of government and universities to target policies aimed at tackling the disadvantage faced by students from working class backgrounds.² It also risks eroding public accountability of the HE sector.

The proposed new suite of measures is strongly focused on the most disadvantaged young people - those who were claiming free school meals during year 11, those who live in the fifth of postcodes with the lowest HE participation, those who attend schools and colleges with the weakest track records of supporting young people through to further study and those in households with low incomes at the point of application to HE.

But the proposed measures have no metrics looking at disadvantage faced by those from ordinary working class backgrounds in accessing higher education. This is a concerning omission.

Young people from working class backgrounds are significantly less likely than their peers to enter university - especially at the most selective institutions - and there has been little progress over time in improving outcomes. While around one in three adults in employment are in working class jobs,³ only 14.5 per cent of entrants to the Russell Group – and 7.2 per

¹ HEFCE, *Invitation to comment on future changes to the UK Performance Indicators*, HEFCE Circular Letter 17/2015 (2015)

² This letter defines “working class” as being in a routine or manual occupation (NS-SEC 5-7) and a “working class background” as having parents in these occupations

³ ONS, *Labour Market Statistics: Table EMP11* (July 2015)

cent of entrants to Oxbridge – are from working class backgrounds.⁴ The proportion of students from working class backgrounds has decreased over the last decade in over half of Russell Group universities in England. Our 2013 report on fair access found that there were almost 1,900 fewer students from lower socio-economic groups at Russell Group universities than there would be if HESA benchmarks were achieved.⁵ And a recent study found that those from working class backgrounds are far less likely than their peers to be successful in securing an offer from Russell Group universities after controlling for a wide range of factors including prior attainment, subjects studied at A-level, ethnicity, whether they lived in a disadvantage area, school type and the competitiveness of the courses they applied for.⁶ There is also a large body of evidence demonstrating the impact that social class can have on university participation and on subsequent outcomes.⁷ Ending the ability to track social class through the higher education system would be a retrograde step.

Annex A of Circular 17/2015 justifies abolishing the socio-economic background indicator on the basis that “the data used for the indicator is widely acknowledged to be of poor quality”. We have not seen compelling evidence that the issues with data quality are sufficient to justify abolishing the indicator. While we accept that non-response is a problem, no analysis has been presented in the consultation document or since looking at differences in non-response by social background or to quantify the potential impact of non-response in creating systematic bias in the data. This information is necessary to determine whether the issues caused by non-response are sufficient to justify discontinuing the indicator. Information about parental occupation is also extensively used by widening participation leads in universities to monitor and target their efforts and there is evidence to suggest that it is considered by them to perform relatively well compared to other indicators in terms of both its reliability and precision.⁸ It is disappointing that the proposed solution to data quality issues is to discontinue trying to monitor a crucial dimension of social mobility rather than taking action to improve the quality of the data.

Discontinuing the indicator would be less problematic if the new suite of indicators provided sufficient information to track outcomes for young people from working class backgrounds. But we do not think it does. As we note above, most of the proposed indicators are focused on the 15-20 per cent most disadvantaged rather than the broader working class and it appears that little analysis has been done looking at the overlaps between different potential indicators to evaluate whether or not the proposed new indicators will include good proxies for social class.

Also, several of the other existing and proposed new indicators have significant issues of their own. For example, whether an individual claims free school meals has well known limitations as a proxy for disadvantage and area-based measures of disadvantage such as POLAR include many individuals from advantaged backgrounds who live in less advantaged

⁴ Unpublished data provided to the Social Mobility and Child Poverty Commission by HESA looking at young, UK domiciled entrants to first degree courses during 2013/14

⁵ Social Mobility and Child Poverty Commission, *Higher Education: The Fair Access Challenge* (2013). This uses the HESA definition of lower socio-economic groups (NS-SEC 4-7) which includes those with parents who are self-employed in addition to those from what we have defined as working class backgrounds

⁶ Boliver *Exploring ethnic inequalities in admission to Russell Group universities in Sociology* (May 12 2015)

⁷ See for example Aimhigher Research and Consultancy Network, *Literature review of research into widening participation to higher education*, Report to HEFCE and OFFA (2013)

⁸ See for example Harrison, Waller and Last, *The evaluation of widening participation activities in higher education – a survey of institutional leaders in England* (June 2015)

areas⁹ which can lead to perverse incentives for institutions.¹⁰ Finally, the proposed income indicator is untested, may have significant data quality issues and, as a snapshot measure of household income, may not be a robust indicator of disadvantage. It would be prudent to not commit to discontinuing the social class indicator until the new experimental indicators have been fully developed and their quality and ability to serve as proxies for social class has been assessed.

We urge you to reconsider the proposal to discontinue the use of the socio-economic classification indicator, instead taking steps to improve it, including through:

- Working with UCAS to develop proposals for increasing the response rate to the parental occupation question.
- Working with UCAS to improve the ability to reliably code responses to the parental occupation question to NS-SEC classes.
- Carrying out analysis to understand the extent to which non-response to the parental occupation question systematically differs by social background and to quantify the extent to which this is likely to bias estimates of the social class background of entrants to higher education.
- Reporting data on the basis of the three-class version of the NS-SEC framework: managerial and professional occupations (NS-SEC 1 and 2); intermediate occupations (NS-SEC 3 and 4); and routine and manual occupations (NS-SEC 5, 6 and 7).

Best wishes,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Alan Milburn', with a stylized, cursive script.

Rt Hon Alan Milburn

⁹ For example, Table 25 and 26 of HEFCE, *Further Information on POLAR 3*, Issues Paper February 2014/01 (2014) suggests that 51 per cent of entrants to higher education from low participation areas with a known social background in 2011 were from managerial and professional backgrounds (NS-SEC 1-3)

¹⁰ See Harrison, Waller and Last (2015)