

5 October 2015

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Dear Alan,

**Letter regarding UK Performance Indicators on widening participation (dated 18/09/2015)**

Many thanks for your letter regarding the proposed changes to the UK Performance Indicators on widening participation.

You expressed concern regarding the proposal to discontinue the use of National Statistics Social Economic Classification (NS-SEC) in the UK Performance Indicators (UKPIs). This decision has been taken by the UK Performance Indicators Steering Group because of an acceptance that the information is flawed in a number of fundamental ways, and the poor quality of the data underlying the existing UKPIs in particular. Although the group has worked with data collection partners including HEFCE and the other UK HE funding bodies, UCAS and HESA to improve the quality of the data over a number of years, the underlying data is not of sufficient quality (see below) to continue to publish as an Official Statistics indicator. This poor quality conflicts with one of the principles of the UKPIs that "Data used for the indicator should be of high quality collected in a consistent and fair way across the sector".

The data quality issues are stark. For example, in the 2015 published UKPIs for widening participation, nearly all English higher education institutions captured schooling or area-based information for at least 85% of its entrant cohort. In comparison, 89 institutions failed to reach this 85% level in terms of NS-SEC reporting.

This decision was not taken lightly and the UKPI steering group considered evidence from a number of sources including: discussions with data collection partners; stakeholder consultation in the 2013 fundamental review; advice from the UK Performance Indicators Technical Group (which includes representation from UCAS and

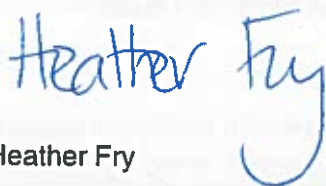
HESA); and expert roundtable discussions (which included representation from your Commission).

However, although the steering group has signalled the NS-SEC information will not be used within the UKPIs, the data will continue to be collected via UCAS and HESA, and be available for analysis via HESA. Thus those who consider the data still has utility can continue to use it. Were robust alternatives available that address parental occupation or offer class based measures the steering group, and all those who have contributed to its understanding of this area, would I am sure have been keen to explore the use of these alternatives. The UKPI steering group will continue to work with data collection partners to raise the quality of information available on measures of disadvantage for students (including parental occupation information that you mention in your letter). If the quality of the information on NS-SEC improves sufficiently to meet all of the UKPI principles and also the Office of National Statistics (ONS) Official Statistics conditions, the steering group will consider the reinstatement an indicator based on NS-SEC information.

I'm pleased that you strongly welcome the decision to introduce the trialling of a number of new indicators but note your concerns on the issues with these indicators. Please be reassured that the UKPI steering group were aware of these issues when they took the decision to introduce these new indicators, and this is part of the reason why these new indicators are being introduced as experimental rather than formal Official Statistics. This will allow these new indicators to be developed, published, receive feedback, mature, and be modified (or dropped) before a fixed methodology is established within UKPI publications.

I know my analyst colleagues have spoken with your staff on this matter, but please do not hesitate to contact us again should you wish to do so. We would of course especially welcome your feedback once the first of the new experimental indicators start to be published.

Yours sincerely



Heather Fry

Director (Regulation and Assurance)