

## **Performance Indicators Technical Group**

Minutes of the Performance Indicators Technical Group held at 11.00pm on Thursday, 28 February 2013 at Northavon House, Bristol

### **Present:**

Members:	Jonathan Waller	Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) [Chair]
	Gordon Anderson	Scottish Funding Council (SFC)
	Matthew Bollington	Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (BIS)
	Suzie Dent	HESA
	Chris Williams	Welsh Government
	Hannah Falvey	Higher Education Funding Council for Wales (HEFCW)
	Allan Nesbitt	Department for Education and Learning, Northern Ireland (DELNI)
	Richard Puttock	HEFCE
	Daniel Walker	UCAS
Secretariat:	Alison Brunt	HEFCE
	Mark Gittoes	HEFCE
Observing:	Emily Thorn	HEFCE
	Ben Winkley	BIS
Apologies:	Jovan Luzajic	Universities UK, Universities Scotland, Higher Education Wales, Guild HE

### **1. Welcome from the chair**

1.1. Following introductions, the chair welcomed members and observers to the meeting.

### **2. Feedback from PISG business undertaken by correspondence in October 2012 and January 2013**

2.1. Business of the Performance Indicators Steering group was undertaken electronically during October 2012 and January 2013, and the chair noted that one of the primary considerations at that time had been the recommendations that had been presented to them with respect to the June 2012 meeting of the PITG. The group were invited to note that all of the actions arising from the PISG's acceptance of the PITG recommendations had either been taken forward or would be addressed during the course of the meeting.

2.2. The publication of an explanatory note or statement outlining the key areas of the PISG's and the PITG's consideration over the last year had previously been discussed by both groups. Members were invited to note that this publication had not been progressed but that the original issue was not as relevant as it once was. The group felt that it would still be a useful exercise to summarise the business of the two groups over the previous year and agreed to take forward the publication of a broader summary piece.

2.3. In response to the action arising at paragraph 2.1.5 of the PISG, HESA informed the group that an initial, qualitative assessment indicated a low impact resulting from the qualifications newly included in the tariff calculation (XTARIFF). HESA and HEFCE would provide a more in-depth analysis of the impact in due course, but members were invited to note that implementation of the change was not contingent on this and would go ahead as planned.

2.4. HESA and the SFC updated the PITG that changes to the note outlining known issues relating to the widening participation indicators for institutions in Scotland were in the process of being implemented, as agreed by both the PITG and the PISG. As requested, an amended link directly to the datazone-based SFC data was expected to go live within the following week.

Action: HESA and HEFCE to draft a broad summary of the business of the PISG and the PITG over the previous year.

### **3. Summary of PITG business undertaken by correspondence in December 2012**

3.1. JW noted that the business undertaken by the PITG by correspondence had, necessarily, been covered in the discussion of the feedback from the PISG business undertaken by correspondence.

3.2. HESA noted that analysis of the impact of the change to the standard DLHE population, which formed the basis of the employment PIs, would be provided when the data became available in July. The group were invited to note that this would post-date the publication of Tranche 2 of the 2013 PIs but that the implementation of the change was not contingent on the analysis.

Action: HESA to provide evidence to the PITG and the PISG on the impact of the change to the standard DLHE population (XPDLHE02) in due course.

### **4. Update of the review of the Performance Indicators**

4.1. MG updated the group on the current position in relation to the fundamental review of the PIs, which had been commissioned by HEFCE on behalf of the PISG. The group were informed that the tendering process would close later that morning and that so far, HEFCE had received 25 expressions of interest. The selection process would involve representatives from each of HEFCE, HEFCW and UUK, and the review would be steered by a review project group with wider membership, including a number of the organisations represented on the PISG and the PITG.

4.2. The successful tenderers were expected to commence work on the review at the end of March 2013, and to report to the PISG in July/September 2013. The review project group would meet twice, in April and June.

### **5. Suppressed data in totals and benchmark calculations (PITG 13/01)**

5.1. RP introduced the paper and the group noted that they could find no justification for suppressed data remaining in the calculation of totals and benchmarks. In particular, members expressed a concern that in some circumstances there was potential for the inclusion of suppressed data to materially impact on the benchmarks of other institutions and this was not desirable. The group accepted the recommendation.

5.2. Members noted that, among English institutions, data suppressions were more common with respect to the non-continuation indicators than the widening participation

indicators. This was on account of summary, institution-level widening participation information being available to institutions from the HEFCE web facility, a tool which allowed institutions to access a range of derived statistics in order to identify potential data errors that could subsequently be corrected prior to their formal data submission to HESA.

Action: The PITG to recommend to the PISG that HESA remove data for suppressed institutions from the calculation of totals and benchmarks in the 2014 and subsequent publications of Tranche 1 of the PIs.

5.3. The group discussed issues relating to the timing of removals of suppressed data from the calculation of totals and benchmarks for Tranche 1 of the PI publication. In particular, the group agreed that it would not be feasible to re-preview the recalculated totals and benchmarks to institutions once suppressions had been implemented following the initial institutional preview period. Instead, the initial institutional preview period would invite institutions to note that benchmarks accompanying their indicators remained subject to change. It was established that an institution would be contacted on an ad-hoc basis should the recalculation of totals and benchmarks have led to a downward change in the significance marker(s) associated with their indicator(s): this would not include re-previewing the information to the affected institution. HESA indicated that, on this basis, the production schedule of the tables for release in Tranche 1 of the PIs would potentially need to be extended. However, the length of the extension was likely to depend on the number of tables in which suppressions would be implemented in a given year and HESA committed to further consider the consequences for the publication schedule in this regard.

Action: HESA to consider impacts on the PI Tranche 1 publication schedule of the revised approach to institutional preview discussed by the PITG.

5.4. With respect to Tranche 2 of the PI publication members noted that the funding bodies were already enforcing suppressions on the basis of an institution's response rates for the DLHE survey, and that this process could be automated and extended to include totals and benchmarks. Specifically, if an appropriate response rate threshold could be established across the four devolved administrations, automatic suppressions could be implemented in HESA's initial calculation of the employment PIs. The group recognised that as a result, changes to totals and benchmarks subsequent to the initial institutional preview period would be exceptional, but in the event that any further suppression was required the principles discussed in relation to Tranche 1 of the PIs would apply.

5.5. Members agreed that the revised approach to suppression within Tranche 2 of the PI publication could be applied to the 2013 publication. This would require appropriate response rate thresholds for the different employment indicators to be documented and agreed by the PITG by correspondence

Action: HEFCE to circulate the existing DLHE response rate thresholds implemented for English institutions with respect to the employment PIs to the four funding bodies by correspondence for consideration and agreement.

Action: HESA to automatically remove data on the basis of institutions' below threshold DLHE response rates from the calculation of the indicators, totals and benchmarks in the 2013 and subsequent publications of Tranche 2 of the PIs.

## **6. Assessment of Data Protection risks in PIs**

**(PITG 13/02)**

6.1. JW introduced the paper and noted that data protection experts at HESA currently deemed the PIs to be low risk on account of an inability to deduce any new information even in the exceptional event that an individual could be identified. Specifically, you would need to know a number of personal details regarding an individual before you were able to identify them in the data and such identification was unlikely to provide any new information. The group considered table T7 to potentially pose the highest risks, but given that this table was not restricted to an entrant population, nor split by age marker, and was one of the lower profile tables, this was still deemed to be a low and acceptable risk.

6.2. Members were invited to note an understanding that having moved from a suppression limit based on the denominator being less than 20 to being less than 22.5 provided little advantage in respect of reduced potential for PIs to identify individuals, but that there were other benefits to having made the change. These included consistency with Unistats publications. More generally, some improvements could be made to the suppression approaches used with the PIs but a consequence of this would be an adverse affect on the utility of the information that they provided.

6.3. The group agreed that use of variable precision and differential rounding within the PI tables was not desirable on account of the potential for lack of understanding and risks of misinterpretation, particularly in relation to distances of indicators from benchmarks. The PITG agreed that there should be no change to the precision used within the PIs: the risks of disclosure were acceptable and percentages would continue to be rounded to one decimal place.

Action: HESA to continue the existing approach to precision and rounding used within the PI publications.

6.4. While the group recognised that an increase to the threshold for the denominator (from 22.5 to 52.5) would further reduce the potential for PIs to identify individuals, members were concerned that such a change would severely jeopardise the utility of some tables. The PITG agreed that the existing suppression approach presented low and acceptable risks, and that the PIs should continue to implement a suppression limit based on the denominator being less than 22.5. They committed to exploring further evidence relating to the impact of changing this threshold to 52.5.

Action: HESA to prepare a paper for the PITG's next meeting providing further evidence of the impact of increasing the suppression threshold to 52.5.

## **7. Unknown information in the benchmarking groups**

**(PITG 13/03)**

7.1. ET introduced the paper and highlighted to the group the potential for benchmarks across the sector to be distorted by a high proportion of individuals with unknown information in relation to one of the benchmarking factors. It was explained that a high proportion of individuals with unknown information could lead to a high proportion of individuals being placed in the unknown groupings used in calculating benchmarks. The potential diversity within the unknown benchmarking groups could then mean that students with very different characteristics were being benchmarked against one another, and consequently could lead to unreliability in institutional benchmarks.

7.2. It was clarified that the suppression approach described by the paper related solely to the benchmark figure: the institution's indicator would still be published should such an approach be adopted. It was also noted that the approach would only relate to entirely unknown information: it would not apply in relation to level 3 qualifications with unknown or not applicable tariff points, for example. The impact of implementing a threshold of 50 per cent for unknown values was also considered, and ET informed the group that HEFCE analysis indicated that in the existing WP PIs for the 2010-11 cohort, only two institutions would have had their benchmark suppressed (both in table T2c).

7.3. On account of similarities with the principles discussed in relation to paper PITG 13/01, the group accepted the recommendation. Members considered information regarding qualifications held on entry to HE as an example, and reiterated their concern that the potential for unknown or suppressed data to materially impact on the benchmarks of institutions was not desirable. They agreed that a threshold of 50 per cent for unknown values within benchmarking factors should be applied in the 2014 publication of the performance indicators.

Action: The PITG to recommend to the PISG that HESA implement a suppression approach whereby an institution has no benchmark published in the event that their data contains more than 50 per cent unknown values within the benchmarking factors. The recommendation is to include the approach being implemented in the 2014 and subsequent publications of the PIs.

## **8. Use of POLAR in table series T2**

**(PITG 13/04)**

8.1. The paper was introduced by ET who invited the group to note that the issue under consideration was the appropriateness of a measure based on a young population being used in an indicator considering mature populations. Quintiles based on the proportion of adults in an area who have a HE qualification had been examined as an alternative measure of the relative educational disadvantage of mature students who enter HE.

8.2. HEFCE analysis to date had shown that geographical areas had different profiles with respect to the POLAR classifications than they did with respect to Adult HE quintiles. The group felt that this finding undermined an assumption that young and mature people in an area were similar with regards to educational disadvantage. The Adult HE quintiles were discussed further. It was noted that the quintiles were derived from census data and as such were available UK-wide. However, members questioned the appropriateness of the entire underlying HE-qualified adult population to populations of mature HE entrants, and whether institutional behaviour would be driven through consideration of wards as measured by the percentage of adults with HE qualifications or of wards as measured by the proportions of young people going into HE.

8.3. Members felt that further detail was required to inform any future decision: regarding the type of wards which differ, and the nature of the differences; and the impact of the change to table series T2 of the PIs at an institutional level. Consideration also needed to be made of the practical implications of making and managing what would amount to a substantial change to table series T2.

8.4. Ultimately, however, the group agreed that the matter required a policy decision to be taken to identify what it is that table T2 intends to measure and convey, and what behaviours it seeks to drive. Members questioned whether the table was seeking to provide consistent measures of educational disadvantage across all entrant populations, or whether it was

seeking to accurately reflect educational disadvantage specifically for mature entrants. The group recognised that it would await the PI review outcomes before this matter could be considered any further, and that it was likely to be captured in a future in-depth review process examining the specific sets of PIs.

## **9. Entry qualifications for use with T5, T7 and E1**

**(PITG 13/05)**

9.1. SD introduced the paper and noted that the more granular qualifications on entry information that had been available since 2007-08 was already in use in tables T1 and T3 which consider populations of entrants. The group were now invited to consider when it would be appropriate to make use of these data in tables T5, T7 and E1 which consider populations other than entrants.

9.2. Analysis by HESA suggested that changing the qualification on entry benchmarking groups would have a limited impact on tables T5 and T7, and that no longer combining with the older 2006-07 entry qualifications where data is unknown would be of negligible value for the 2014 publication of the Performance Indicators. On this basis the group accepted the recommendation given at paragraph 2 in relation to tables T5 and T7 and use of the more up to date groupings for the 2014 publication of the PIs.

Action: The PITG to recommend to the PISG that HESA implement use of the more up to date qualification on entry benchmarking groups in the 2014 publication of the Performance Indicators for tables T5 and T7.

9.3. The group acknowledged that while it may have been feasible to make use of the more up to date entry qualification groupings for the 2013 publication of table E1, the impact of the change was likely to have been concentrated among qualifiers from medical and veterinary courses, and other longer courses involving inter-calculated years. Such qualifiers would have commenced their studies six or more years ago and would have entry qualifications recorded in the older format.

9.4. Members discussed the proposal to relocate the International Baccalaureate qualifications to the highest tariff band category and noted that the previous categorisation in the lowest tariff band was an anomaly that was now being corrected. The proposal was amended such that, while the International Baccalaureate Diploma would be relocated into highest tariff band category (group 7 in the paper), the International Baccalaureate Certificate should be subject to the usual tariff calculations on the basis of the grades carried.

9.5. The group accepted the recommendation given at paragraph 2 in relation to table E1 and use of the more up to date groupings for the 2014 publication of the PIs, subject to the amendment detailed in paragraph 9.4 of these minutes.

Action: The PITG to recommend to the PISG that HESA implement use of the more up to date qualification on entry benchmarking groups in the 2014 publication of the Performance Indicators for tables E1, subject to the amendment in relation to International Baccalaureate qualifications.

## **10. Inclusion of foundation year students within the non-continuation indicators**

**(PITG 13/06)**

10.1. The paper was introduced by RP who noted that the issue had been raised by an institution within the sector. The group considered the range of arguments and counter

arguments that the paper presented and felt that the case for retaining integrated foundation year students within the non-continuation indicators was sound. While members acknowledged that such students were materially different, they felt that they were still genuine HE students with an intention to gain an undergraduate qualification and the group perceived the exclusion of these students from the non-continuation indicators to be misleading.

10.2. Members felt that alternative mechanisms to better contextualise the indicators with respect to integrated foundation year students within the population (such as benchmarks and context statistics) were not desirable for the reasons discussed within the paper. However, they acknowledged that there were policy-level considerations with regards to benchmarks and institutional behaviour, and as such this position may be subject to change depending on the outcomes of the PI review process once completed.

10.3. The PITG concurred with the three recommendations of the paper and agreed that they should be recommended to the PISG.

Action: The PITG to recommend to the PISG that students on integrated foundation years should continue to be included in all PIs according to their eventual qualification aim. Also, that no context statistic is added in relation to these students, and nor should any new benchmark factor be introduced to address integrated foundation years.

## **11. Initial indication of the feasibility of using linked historical data within the PIs (PITG 13/07)**

11.1. MG introduced the paper and noted that it was provided only for an initial discussion of the feasibility, barriers and advantages (or otherwise) in using linked, pre-HE administrative data to enhance the Performance Indicators. It was acknowledged that a much more thorough consideration of the issue would be required before anything were to be recommended to the PISG.

11.2. Members contributed their thoughts on this topic:

- a. UCAS invited members to note their previous experience in this area stemming from their work on contextual information and with schools. UCAS' UK-wide contextual information consultation group was volunteered as a potential sounding board for the PITG/PISG in this area. The currency of data was not felt to be the significant issue, rather UCAS highlighted limitations with respect to the availability and parity of data at the level of granularity required for the PIs across the UK administrations. This included differences in data protection and validation processes. The requirement for a series of proxies to be used to bridge differences between the administrations was emphasised.
- b. Colleagues from Wales and Scotland acknowledged issues around comparability of available data but noted that it was desirable to do as much as possible to explore the potential in this area further. A view was expressed from both administrations that a number of the barriers relating to parity of data could probably be overcome.
- c. Colleagues from Northern Ireland noted particular concerns relating to the ownership of data and a potential inability to influence validation and other processes which may impact on the data's suitability for use in this context.

d. Members from England expanded on this to emphasise potential problems with regards to data protection and inability to share data sourced from linking with institutions for quality assurance purposes. This was considered to be a significant political challenge within England, in which the PI governance would have only a limited impact. The Government's transparency agenda could alter the course of the debate in this area but a political commitment with regards to these issues would ultimately be required.

11.3. The group agreed that it would be appropriate for the PISG to discuss at a later date the feasibility of using linked historical data within the PIs.

Action: Representatives of the four UK funding bodies to develop a more comprehensive paper for the next meeting of the PITG , detailing the options with regard to the use of linked pre-HE administrative data in the PIs, and the feasibility of such options.

## **12. Rates of qualification from postgraduate research degrees (PITG 13/08)**

12.1. AB introduced the paper and noted that it was provided to the group upon their request and for information only. While recognising that proposals for new PIs would not be considered until after the PI review processes were complete, members noted that measures of postgraduate research degree completion were of interest across all four UK nations. Indeed, the devolved administrations noted that regardless of the outcomes of the review processes, it was possible that their own institutions would request the provision of similar or comparable measures of research degree qualification to those currently produced for English institutions.

12.2. In particular, the group considered that it would take a length of time for data quality issues to filter through in respect of postgraduate research populations, and that there would be benefit to preparing institutions for the possibility that these populations would be subject to scrutiny – in the PIs or elsewhere – at some future point.

Action: HEFCE to share details of the methodology used in their publication of rates of qualification from postgraduate research degrees, along with its outputs, with the PITG representatives of the devolved administrations.

## **13. Papers proposed as exempt from immediate publication**

13.1. The group agreed that none of the papers should be exempt from immediate publication.

Action: HESA to publish the agreed non-exempt papers from this February 2013 meeting on their website alongside associated content relating to governance of the PIs.

## **14. Date of next meeting**

14.1. The PITG would next meet following the September 2013 meeting of the Performance Indicators Steering Group; most likely in November 2013, with dates to be agreed by correspondence.

## **15. Any other business**

15.1. No further items were raised by the group under any other business.

**Meeting closed at 12.50pm**



## **Actions arising:**

Paragraph 2.4: HESA and HEFCE to draft a broad summary of the business of the PISG and the PITG over the previous year.

Paragraph 3.2: HESA to provide evidence to the PITG and the PISG on the impact of the change to the standard DLHE population (XPDLHE02) in due course.

Paragraph 5.2: The PITG to recommend to the PISG that HESA remove data for suppressed institutions from the calculation of totals and benchmarks in the 2014 and subsequent publications of Tranche 1 of the PIs.

Paragraph 5.3: HESA to consider impacts on the PI Tranche 1 publication schedule of the revised approach to institutional preview discussed by the PITG.

Paragraph 5.5: HEFCE to circulate the existing DLHE response rate thresholds implemented for English institutions with respect to the employment PIs to the four funding bodies by correspondence for consideration and agreement.

Paragraph 5.5: HESA to automatically remove data on the basis of institutions' below threshold DLHE response rates from the calculation of the indicators, totals and benchmarks in the 2013 and subsequent publications of Tranche 2 of the PIs.

Paragraph 6.3: HESA to continue the existing approach to precision and rounding used within the PI publications.

Paragraph 6.4: HESA to prepare a paper for the PITG's next meeting providing further evidence of the impact of increasing the suppression threshold to 52.5.

Paragraph 7.3: The PITG to recommend to the PISG that HESA implement a suppression approach whereby an institution has no benchmark published in the event that their data contains more than 50 per cent unknown values within the benchmarking factors. The recommendation is to include the approach being implemented in the 2014 and subsequent publications of the PIs.

Paragraph 9.2: The PITG to recommend to the PISG that HESA implement use of the more up to date qualification on entry benchmarking groups in the 2014 publication of the Performance Indicators for tables T5 and T7.

Paragraph 9.5: The PITG to recommend to the PISG that HESA implement use of the more up to date qualification on entry benchmarking groups in the 2014 publication of the Performance Indicators for tables E1, subject to the amendment in relation to International Baccalaureate qualifications.

Paragraph 10.3: The PITG to recommend to the PISG that students on integrated foundation years should continue to be included in all PIs according to their eventual qualification aim. Also, that no context statistic is added in relation to these students, and nor should they be incorporated into the benchmarking calculations.

Paragraph 11.3: Representatives of the four UK funding bodies to develop a more comprehensive paper for the next meeting of the PITG, detailing the options with regard to the use of linked pre-HE administrative data in the PIs, and the feasibility of such options.

Paragraph 12.2: HEFCE to share details of the methodology used in their publication of rates of qualification from postgraduate research degrees, along with its outputs, with the PITG representatives of the devolved administrations.

Paragraph 13.1: HESA to publish the agreed non-exempt papers from this February 2013 meeting on their website alongside associated content relating to governance of the PIs.