

## DISCUSSION AROUND FTE

16 NOVEMBER 2018, 10:00  
CONFERENCE CALL

Present:

Andy Breeze, OfS  
John Britton, Cardiff University  
Chris Carpenter, Loughborough University  
Christine Couper, The University of Greenwich  
Judith Dutton, Open University  
Hannah Falvey, HEFCW  
Rachel Fuidge, HESA  
Debbie Grossman, The University of Greenwich  
Liz Heal, HEFCW  
James McLaren, HESA  
Hazel Miles, HESA  
Daniel Norton, Loughborough University  
Emma Thomas, Open University  
Hoa Tu, Open University  
Ruth Underwood, HESA  
Michael Wood, HESA

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## UPDATE FROM HESA AS TO WHAT THE CURRENT PROPOSALS ARE (INCLUDING SUGGESTED DERIVED FIELD)

There are three methods to record Full Time Equivalence at the moment:

1. Providers in Northern Ireland return a predicted FTE against the Student course session and then a final figure in the current STULOAD field.
2. Providers in Scotland should only return STULOAD at the end of the Student course session.
3. Providers in England and Wales return FTE every reference period and HESA derive the STULOAD field on Student course session.

There have been discussions more recently about HESA deriving an FTE for each reference period, and providers would then only need to return a figure in the FTE entity if they disagreed with the derivation.

## UPDATES FROM OFS AND HEFCW AS TO THE REASONS BEHIND THE APPROACH WE ARE PROPOSING, AND ANY CONCERNS THEY ARE TRYING TO ADDRESS

OfS:

This is the main measure of the activity in the sector. It is used when calculating provider fees, in defining TEF eligibility and other regulatory uses. It is referenced a

lot when answering parliamentary questions, inputs to policy decisions and in information given to the sector.

The method of recording FTE needs to be robust, have an audit trail for any conclusions reached as a result of the FTE, be consistent across the sector, and in a timely manner (i.e. getting this at the end of the year doesn't help). We also can't have a massive change in the numbers, simply because of reporting methodologies changing. For example, we can't have it look like part time numbers are increasing, when they aren't.

HEFCW:

Only other thing to add is that HEFCW often do comparison with other UK countries (particularly for part time provision). They can use credits for comparisons within Wales, they need to use FTE when looking across the country. Also getting it in a timely manner is very important, and the end of the year approach only would make this difficult.

## COMMENTS FROM PROVIDERS AS TO WHETHER OR NOT THIS APPROACH WORKS

Open University:

The proposal of recording it over a year, is a field calculated at the OU anyway, so we are happy to send this in.

Concerns about having consistent time series, particularly for part time students, as they have suffered in the past from changes to presentation.

Estimation for the OU is quite difficult to return against a Course Session for their flexible study pattern students as it's impossible to estimate this. This is usually done at an aggregate level only.

Loughborough:

Why do we have to return FTE per reference period? FTE is looked at over the Course Session, so surely this is the right place to return it. However, if this was needed by reference period, then deriving it is the way to go.

We consider if the student is taking 120 credits, and then whether the student actually did that. If this was needed each reference period, we would probably want to derive this in order to check it.

Guidance would need to be robust around the definition – i.e. does this include exam periods etc.?

Greenwich:

We agree with Loughborough's comments. Any derivation needs to be transparent, so we can understand exactly your interpretation of FTE. We will be calculating an annualised FTE anyway as we need it for our internal purposes. Why is it necessary to collect FTE rather than derive?

Cardiff:

We've done some testing on the FTE proposal and it's fine for standard provision (long thin modules) but doesn't work well for non-standard studying (a mix and match or shorter provision). For example: Easter holiday causes variations in the lengths, which might make it less comparable between reference periods.

SROC (by Chris):

For the FTE over Course session, we are being asked to predict it, update it and then finalise it. If it has to be per reference period, then we should derive it. There is some difficulty around no-module provision, such as postgraduate research students, for example how accurate would this need to be if students move to writing up?

OfS's response to each of the points raised by providers:

1. Course Session / consistent time series

Looking at this student by student is a sensible approach. However, we also need to aggregate this up by provider, splitting out by mode, subject etc. Doing this just by course session doesn't allow for a good overview due to the various start and end dates. Provision doesn't fit nicely into a year, which complicates the issues (you end up with a Jenga block!)

We need to ensure consistency so that it is comparable with what we do now, which is why we ended up with the proposal of recording it each reference period.

Greenwich: we would still be predicting what a student would be doing, so surely that still won't be consistent across the sector (some will have small changes, some larger ones)? Why can't you just use the predicted figures?

Concerns are around the possible variations. If the estimations were changing a lot, does that mean that provider has flexible provision, or is that something is going wrong somewhere?

Loughborough: We would be sending actuals later anyway. Would OfS really want to investigate this every time it changed?

Keen to compare estimated figures from providers, against their actual figures (like we already do in the Finance record), so OfS may look at that more in future. Would that perhaps stop some providers from amending their figures? Would this approach affect provider's behaviour?

Loughborough: Providers just would not try to play the system, we know we wouldn't get away with it. All providers have signed up to the code of practice and providers know they will be audited if they tried to game the system.

One key thing to remember is that we don't want providers to appeal funding decisions, simply because they don't agree with our derivation.

Loughborough: Could provider fees not be calculated on a retrospective basis?

The default behaviour at the moment is that if something doesn't happen, we fail safe. We don't want to be in a position where things are implied from a nothing being returned, we want a positive statement of everything. This is why values like FUNDCOMP 3 are still in the record.

## 2. Transparency

OfS is also keen to make this as transparent as possible. If we do derive the FTE, the calculated figure should be obvious to provider – included in the data supply report and in credibility reports etc. That way if providers disagree with the derivation, they could then overwrite it before the data is signed off.

## 3. Natural variations

This is why we ended up with the proposal for providers to send it every reference period. Easter could cause some bumps in the FTEs, to take into account when the holiday period falls. If the module appears to be active during that reference period then it needs to be included as it's not just everything that happens on a census date.

Greenwich: In HESES we would be estimating for a whole year, but we would not be sending you the predicted registrations data included in HESES. We thought that data futures would allow OfS to see 'HESES live', but you wouldn't get that with this proposal. How could you extrapolate for a whole year if we only send you one reference period?

HEFCW & OfS: we would be aggregating the last three reference periods when we use the data, it would not be only 1 reference period in isolation.

OfS: if the issue is a discrepancy between the data futures model and HESES, OfS are now planning to adapt HESES to fix this.

OfS: the reconciliation exercise in HESES is actuals versus estimates. This is ok if it is done over a 12 month / annual cycle, but not every 4 months.

Loughborough: we will still be doing estimation per student for our internal planning, so not an extra burden for us to return it in the record.

This still won't work for fully flexible provision.

OU: we will have to estimate at an aggregate level. It's ok to derive per reference period for us.

We want to look at the data on an annual cycle. But once data futures is up and running, we may need to look at individual reference periods to monitor drop out rates.

All agreed that the derived value would work best for them, but providers would probably still calculate it anyway, so they could check the derived figures were correct, which is still an increase in burden.

### Proposal:

What if HESA also derive the FTE for the year, and not just the reference periods?  
Are there any other methods we could use?

Loughborough: Any expected module instances would then have to be returned where possible, if an FTE for the Student course session was to be calculated. This might reduce some burden if providers only had to compare against the annual value.

**ACTION: OfS / HEFCW to consider if this approach would work for them.  
Would providers need to submit all their future module data?**

HEFCW suggested we also have a derived field to calculate the last three reference periods, particularly if that's the figure that statutory customers will be using.

**ACTION: HESA to include a derived field for the last three reference periods of FTE values.**

Note: need to consider PGR students and school direct trainees, as these are currently being created with dummy modules.

In terms of burden reduction, this wouldn't be a reduction if providers want to do the calculation themselves anyway, in order to check the figure that HESA derive.

OU: the Northern Ireland method is different to HEFCW / OfS requirement. Please could this be considered? We will struggle to return an estimate at the start of the year.

HESA: are in communication with DfE(NI) and SFC and will be communicating these discussion to them, to give them a chance to reconsider their approaches to match. So we could hopefully end up with a UK wide approach to FTE.

Loughborough: League tables can't use the FTE data until the end of the year, or they could move to use the last three reference periods as well. Have they been given the heads up on this?

**ACTION: HESA to communicate FTE proposals to colleagues working with League tables, to make them aware.**

All agreed that it was an incredible useful discussion today and welcomed the opportunity to do this more in future.

**GO THROUGH SOME REAL EXAMPLES TOGETHER ABOUT HOW THIS WOULD WORK IN PRACTICE**

Did not get around to this section.