

# UK Performance Indicator Experimental Statistics incorporating Alternative Providers: background and proposals<sup>†</sup>

## WHO PRODUCED THIS EXPERIMENTAL STATISTICS RELEASE?

1. This release has been produced by HESA on behalf of the UK Performance Indicators Steering Group (UKPISG), whose role is to oversee the implementation, management and ongoing development of the UK Performance Indicators (UKPIs) for higher education (HE) through the advice it provides to the UK funding bodies and other relevant bodies. Our pages provide an [introduction](#) and [guide to the UK Performance Indicators](#), as well as information about their [governance](#).

## WHAT IS THE PURPOSE OF THIS EXPERIMENTAL STATISTICS RELEASE?

2. The [Code of Practice for Official Statistics](#) defines [Experimental Statistics](#) as: "new official statistics undergoing evaluation. They are published in order to involve users and stakeholders in their development and as a means to build in quality at an early stage". This Experimental Statistics release aims to explore the incorporation of HE students registered at alternative providers (APs) within the coverage of UKPIs.
3. The UKPIs are Official Statistics which currently cover publicly funded higher education providers in the UK and one alternative provider, The University of Buckingham. In 2016/17 academic year, there were 116 APs delivering HE who held specific course designation in England and who are not covered by the UKPIs. The absence of HE students registered at APs from the coverage of the current UKPIs compromises an agreed [principle for UKPIs](#) that "UKPIs should normally seek to reflect the totality of higher education provision and institutions across the UK".
4. The HESA AP student record was collected for the first time in relation to 2014/15 academic year, and 63 APs were required to submit a 2014/15 AP Student record. A further 38 APs submitted a 2015/16 AP Student return. As a result, and for the first time, data is now available that allows the extended coverage including HE students at APs within the derivation of UKPI measures covering the areas of widening participation and non-continuation. Recognising that there is great interest in HE that is delivered outside of publicly funded providers, the UKPISG have taken the decision to release these measures, in the form of UK Performance Indicator Experimental Statistics.
5. The main reasons for the 'experimental' nature of this Experimental Statistics release are the derivation of the indicators which include certain methodological changes, and the application of an existing benchmarking methodology to a new group of providers. It is these issues on which we are particularly seeking feedback from users and stakeholders, to enable us to explore and understand the quality of the indicators that have been produced. We also

welcome feedback on the content, structure and usefulness of the statistics published in the release; please email any comments or suggestions for future releases to [pitem@hesa.ac.uk](mailto:pitem@hesa.ac.uk).

## WHAT IS AN ALTERNATIVE PROVIDER AND WHAT IS A DESIGNATED COURSE?

6. APs are higher education providers who do not receive recurrent funding from the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) or other public bodies and who are not further education colleges. There are a substantial number of APs, but only APs located in England who have successfully completed the designation process are required to submit data to us (except those who only have postgraduate courses designated for disabled students' allowances (DSA) only). This designation process means eligible students can access loans and grants from the Student Loans Company (SLC) on specific courses, referred to as designated courses.

## WHAT IS THE COVERAGE OF THE HESA AP STUDENT RECORD? HOW DOES IT DIFFER TO THE HESA STUDENT RECORD?

### THE 2014/15 AP STUDENT RECORD

7. 63 APs submitted a 2014/15 AP Student data return to HESA. These 63 were APs who met specific criteria, laid out by the former Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (BIS, now the Department for Education, DfE), requiring APs to subscribe to HESA. Those criteria placed the requirement on APs who had courses designated for full-time student support in 2014/15 and a student number control allocation awarded by BIS.
8. The 2014/15 AP student record was collected in respect of all students registered at the reporting institution who followed full-time and part-time undergraduate and postgraduate initial teacher training (ITT) courses which had been designated for student support purposes, irrespective of whether the student was in receipt of Student Loans Company funding. The record did not collect any information in respect of students who followed HE courses which had not been designated for student support purposes, even if, when offered by a publicly-funded HEI those courses would have attracted student support.
9. This marks an important difference to HE providers in the publicly funded sector where coverage of the population registered on HE qualifications within HESA student records is known to be broadly complete. This difference does not apply in the case of The University of Buckingham, which has been fully subscribed to HESA and submitting a full HESA student return covering all of their students for an extended period of time, and which is already included throughout the UKPIs.

### THE 2015/16 AP STUDENT RECORD

10. The DfE extended their requirement for the submission of data to HESA in the 2015/16 AP Student record to all APs in England with undergraduate courses designated for student support purposes. This extension resulted in 38 new APs submitting a 2015/16 AP Student return.
11. Another change for 2015/16 meant that it was compulsory for all APs completing the AP Student return to provide information about students enrolled on both designated and non-designated undergraduate courses, as well as on postgraduate initial teacher training (ITT) courses. This change results in greater parity of coverage of the AP student population registered on undergraduate HE qualifications with that of publicly funded providers submitting HESA student records.

## WHAT IS THE IMPACT ON THE EXPERIMENTAL STATISTICS OF DIFFERING COVERAGE OF THE HESA AP STUDENT RECORD?

12. A programme of work by the UK Performance Indicators Technical Group (UKPITG) has examined the feasibility and considerations of incorporating HE delivered by APs within UKPI measures for widening participation and non-continuation.
13. This release of UKPI Experimental Statistics incorporates HE students registered at APs in the widening participation indicators on the basis of the 2015/16 AP Student record and the 2015/16 HESA Student record. The broad parity of coverage across the two records with regards to the population of students registered on undergraduate HE qualifications at APs and publicly funded providers, means that the Experimental Statistics deliver coverage that is both consistent and comprehensive with regard to the population examined by the WP indicators. There is minimal impact on these Experimental Statistics that results from the extensions to coverage described above.
14. With regards to the non-continuation indicators included within this release of UKPI Experimental Statistics, the 2014/15 and 2015/16 AP Student records are both used, along with the 2014/15 and 2015/16 HESA Student records. Those indicators focus on a population of full-time entrants defined within the 2014/15 data, and looks at whether those individuals are still in higher education one year later.
15. The extended coverage provided by the 2015/16 AP Student record has little impact on the non-continuation rates calculated, because it is the 2014/15 entrant cohort that forms the focus. The potential impact extends across all providers, of any type, but is limited to an increased possibility that we can identify a student transferring between providers, to the extent that students might transfer from an AP or publicly funded provider into an(other) AP who has submitted an AP Student record for the first time in 2015/16.
16. However, an important consideration for interpreting the indicators is a difference between publicly funded providers and APs within the Experimental Statistics. For APs the non-continuation rates provided by this release relate only to students who followed courses which had been designated for student support purposes and who also fall within the UKPI defined population for these indicators. For publicly funded providers (and The University of Buckingham) the non-continuation rates provided by this release relate to the complete population of undergraduate students who fall within the UKPI population for these indicators. This means that the indicators shown in this release for APs are based on a subset of the student population at APs that may not be representative of the total population.

## HOW COMPARABLE ARE THE EXPERIMENTAL STATISTICS WITH THE ESTABLISHED UKPIS?

17. As noted above, one of the considerations for interpreting the indicators is a difference between publicly funded providers and APs with respect to the completeness of the student population covered in the non-continuation rates.
18. Within their programme of development work, UKPITG's exploration of areas of potential consistency (or inconsistency) for production of these measures identified two further issues for comparability:

- a. Students at APs tend to have a different profile to those at publicly funded providers; the current benchmarking groups – defined some years ago for the publicly funded sector – may not therefore be entirely adequate.
  - b. The established methodology for defining entrants and continuing students could distort the interpretation of performance at APs where a significant proportion of the non-standard provision offered by APs was falling outside of the current parameters.
19. In taking their decision to release these Experimental Statistics, the UKPISG agreed that the release would have some important features to address these issues. With regard to these features (described below), it is important to note that the main reasons for the ‘experimental’ nature of this Experimental Statistics release are the derivation of the indicators, and the application of an existing benchmarking methodology to a new group of providers. It is these issues on which we are particularly seeking feedback from users and stakeholders.
  20. More generally, it should be noted that this is the second year that the AP student record data has been collected and over a third of providers required to submit data to HESA were doing so for the first time. We are continuing to explore and understand the quality of the data that has been returned by APs and in common with all HESA data collections and all HE providers, the data returned to HESA by providers will be continually evaluated for its stability, reliability and completion over future annual collections.

#### HOW DOES THE EXPERIMENTAL STATISTICS METHODOLOGY DIFFER FROM THE ESTABLISHED UKPI ONE?

21. As noted above, in taking their decision to release these Experimental Statistics, the UKPISG agreed that the release would have some important features to accommodate the two issues identified through UKPITG’s development work. These are considered here in turn.

#### STUDENT PROFILES

22. While recognising the differences in the profile of students at APs, UKPISG have been clear that **UKPI Experimental Statistics incorporating HE students at APs should be as consistent as possible with the established UKPIs**. In particular, UKPITG and UKPISG have been keen to ensure that no changes are made which would pre-empt the outcomes of the review of benchmarking methodology currently underway. This leads us to **apply the established benchmarking methodology to the new group of providers incorporated within this Experimental Statistics release**, meaning that **AP’s benchmarks are calculated on the basis of a sector defined as the combination of UK publicly funded providers and APs**. The selection of factors used in the benchmarking is one of the areas under review, which is intended to take account of the wider provider base for the UKPIs specifically.
23. The potential influence on non-continuation of various factors, including student background, has been suggested in relation to the adequacy of the current benchmarking approach.. These influences are being explored through that review work, and will be reported on in the outcomes of that process. For example, if the review process determines that additional or different factors are appropriate to account for differences in the student characteristics of the wider provider base, this could affect the benchmark values. This must be borne in mind if users try to compare across different provider types.
24. Exposure of the indicators and benchmarks as Experimental Statistics provides a useful opportunity to capture the views of users and stakeholders on issues such as this – views which can be explored and tested as part of the review process. In the meantime, the potential

relationship between widening participation measures and non-continuation is one of the reasons that UKPISG have chosen to publish both of these measures simultaneously in this release, allowing users to assess both dimensions together to gain a more 'rounded' view of a provider's performance.

## DEFINING ENTRANTS AND CONTINUING STUDENTS

25. UKPITG's work on the feasibility and development of UKPI methodologies with respect to the incorporation of HE students at APs has taken care to deviate as little as possible from the established UKPI measures, in line with UKPISG guidance. However, a small number of modifications to those methodologies have been considered necessary, to accommodate the issues identified through UKPITG's development work in relation to the definition of entrants and continuing students.
26. These modifications, and the rationale for them, are described in the paragraphs that follow: they are described here as 'proposals', in anticipation of feedback from users as to the potential application of these modifications within annual publications of UKPI Official Statistics. To this end, this Experimental Statistics release applies these methodological modifications to its coverage of both APs and publicly funded HE providers.

## PROPOSED CHANGE TO THE METHODOLOGY FOR DEFINING THE FULL-TIME AND PART-TIME ENTRANT POPULATION

27. It has been observed that many alternative providers operate a different model of provision to publicly-funded providers, for example, with students starting courses throughout the academic year.
28. A longstanding principle of the UKPIs methodology is to remove from the entrant populations those students who withdraw from their studies early in their year of entry. At present, the methodology for all of the full-time UKPIs and for the part-time WP UKPIs achieves this by removing students who withdraw before 1 December in the year of entry. As a result, students on courses that start on or after 1 December will not be excluded as early withdrawals, no matter how quickly they withdraw from their studies.
29. The entrant population for the part-time non-continuation UKPIs (Table T3e) is already defined differently to those UKPIs referenced in paragraph 6, and adopts an approach whereby students who withdraw within 50 days of the date on which they commenced their studies are removed from the entrant population.
30. UKPITG's work on the feasibility and development of the methodology with respect to APs has led to a **proposal that students be removed from the full-time entrant population for all measures if they withdraw within 50 days of the date on which they commenced their studies**. And similarly with regard to the definition of the part-time entrant population for the WP measures.
31. As noted in paragraph 28, the established methodology treats students differently depending on when in the year they start their course. Variation in the use of non-standard academic years across providers may effectively be resulting in differential application of the parameters defining entrant populations. This proposal would make all entrant populations consistent with the present methodology for the part-time non-continuation UKPIs, and is an approach that would ensure that any provider teaching students on non-standard academic years are neither advantaged nor disadvantaged relative to others in the sector.

## PROPOSED CHANGE TO THE METHODOLOGY FOR PRODUCING NON-CONTINUATION UKPIS FOR FULL-TIME AND PART-TIME STUDENTS

32. UKPITG's work also leads to a **proposal that the methodology for determining whether or not a student continues is adjusted to align with the methodology for determining whether a student is in the entrant population.**
33. This proposal has two implications. Firstly, that the **HEI and AP student data is combined to form the 'sector' in which a student continues or transfers.** So under the adjusted methodology a student transferring between an HEI and an AP (or vice versa) would be considered a transfer. Under the established methodology such students would be considered as no longer in HE.
34. Secondly, that **a student would be counted as continuing if they are present at the same HE provider 50 days after the anniversary of their start date** in the year after entry for full-time, or the second year after entry for part-time.
35. Under the established methodology for the non-continuation UKPIs for full-time (Tables T3a, T3b, T3c, T3d ) and part-time (Table T3e) an entrant defined as 'continuing' if they are actively studying at HE level at the same HE provider after 1 December in the year after entry (or two years after entry for part-time students). A student who withdraws before 1 December in the year after entry would also be classified in this way if they qualified with a first degree or an other undergraduate (OUG) qualification from the same HE provider prior to withdrawing.
36. This proposal would mean that if a student leaves before 50 days after the anniversary of their start date, they would only be classified as continuing if they have qualified with a first degree or an other undergraduate qualification from the same HE provider prior to the date in question.

## DIALLING BACK THE ACADEMIC YEAR FOR THE FULL-TIME AND PART-TIME ENTRANT POPULATIONS

37. However, UKPITG have identified that this proposed methodological change presents an issue when defining the entrant population. For those students who start on or after 12 June, their activity for the whole of the 50 day period from the anniversary of their start date in which we need to look for a qualification will not be captured in the HESA data for the academic year following year of entry, but in the following year of HESA data.
38. It is therefore proposed that the academic year is 'dialed back' when determining the entrant population, to consider study commencing within a different window than the standard academic year for the non-continuation and WP UKPIs. **The proposal is that the entrant population would include all students who started on or after 12 June in the previous academic year and who start before 12 June in the academic year in question.**

## WHAT ARE THE NEXT STEPS? WHAT IS THE FUTURE DIRECTION OF TRAVEL?

39. Feedback is invited on the methodological refinements described and implemented within this March 2017 release of UKPI Experimental Statistics, to enable the UKPISG and UKPITG to explore and understand the quality of the indicators that have been produced. We also welcome feedback on the content, structure and usefulness of the Experimental Statistics published. Please email any enquiries, comments or suggestions for future releases to [pitem@hesa.ac.uk](mailto:pitem@hesa.ac.uk).

40. In line with the Code of Practice for Official Statistics definition of Experimental Statistics it is UKPISG's expectation that in the fullness of time, after appropriate evaluation and any further development as identified from that evaluation, the methodological refinements employed within these Experimental Statistics would be applied within annual publications of UKPI Official Statistics.
41. In addition, UKPISG have taken care to acknowledge that while this Experimental Statistics release aims to explore the incorporation of HE students registered at APs, the absence of HE students registered at further education colleges (FECs) from the coverage of UKPIs continues to compromise the agreed principle for UKPIs that "UKPIs should normally seek to reflect the totality of higher education provision and institutions across the UK". Since the 2013 fundamental [review](#) of UKPIs, UKPISG have been clear in their commitment to the incorporation of HE students at both FECs and APs within the UKPIs.
42. The inclusion of FECs within the UKPIs is challenging due to the differences in the data and its availability across the different UK administrations. In this and other areas, UKPISG has agreed that UKPIs should not be published unless they can cover providers in a majority of the four UK administrations. UKPISG has committed to continuing to work with the different national data-sets towards UKPIs, but in the meantime UKPISG has noted that individual administrations may publish country-specific indicators in a similar format to UKPIs.
43. This is the approach that HEFCE intend to pursue for FECs in England, building on its existing [publications on HE in FECs](#) to update indicators for England only during Autumn 2017. It is anticipated that this publication will continue to **apply the established UKPI benchmarking methodology such that FECs' benchmarks are calculated on the basis of a sector defined as the combination of UK publicly funded providers and FECs**. In approach, this is consistent with the combined publicly funded provider and AP benchmarking within this Experimental Statistics release.
44. UKPISG's expectation is that once the necessary progress towards UKPIs has been made with the different national data-sets, UKPI publications would encompass publicly funded providers, APs and FECs, and – subject to the outcomes of the benchmarking review – apply a single, standardised approach across all institutional types.

*† A version of this paper was shared with providers during the HE provider preview of the Experimental Statistics for data quality purposes.*