

Performance Indicators Steering Group

Minutes of the Performance Indicators Steering Group held at 13.30 on Friday, 29 July 2011 at Centre Point, London

Present:

Members:	Heather Fry	Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) [Chair]
	Alison Allden	Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA)
	David Barrett	Office for Fair Access (OFFA)
	Alex Bols	National Union of Students
	Mark Corver	UCAS (attending on behalf of Bethanie Williams)
	John Duffy	Scottish Funding Council (SFC)
	Celia Hunt	Higher Education Funding Council for Wales (HEFCW)
	Professor Bryan MacGregor	Universities Scotland
	Dr Kevin Mundy	Higher Education Wales
	Professor Geoffrey Petts	Universities UK
	Mark Taylor	BIS (attending on behalf of Paul Rasch)
	Jonathan Waller	HESA
Secretariat:	Alison Brunt	HEFCE
	Mark Gittoes	HEFCE
Apologies:	Peter McAllister	Welsh Government (WG)

1. Welcome from the chair

1.1. Following introductions, the chair welcomed members to the meeting and gave apologies received from the Welsh Government. It was noted that two organisations were yet to nominate their representative.

2. Minutes of the last meeting (28 March 2011)

2.1. The group recommended an extension to paragraph 4.2 of the minutes of the last meeting to ensure that discussion of the PISG's relationship with groups such as HEPISG was better captured. In particular, members felt that AA's membership of PISG and HEPISG should be highlighted as providing a direct overlap of the two groups.

2.2. Otherwise, the minutes were accepted as a true and accurate record of the meeting.

3. Matters arising

3.1. Members were invited to note that the second tranche of the performance indicators had been published smoothly and successfully on 15 July. Interest from the press had been consistent with previous releases.

4. Summary of discussion topics from March 2011 meeting (PISG 11/04)

4.1. HF introduced the paper and noted that a draft summary of the March 2011 meeting had been circulated to members in advance of this meeting. Following a brief discussion, the summary was agreed by the group. They confirmed that the summary would be published alongside the PIs and related content on the HESA website.

Action: HESA to publish the March 2011 PISG meeting summary on their website alongside the PIs and related content.

4.2. A further discussion was undertaken relating to the approach that the PISG should take to the transparency of its work and its discussions. Having considered issues relating to accessibility, appropriate narratives and freedom of information requests, members felt that a move towards greater transparency should be applauded. It was agreed that from this meeting and going forward the PISG would be prepared to publish the PISG and PITG minutes and meeting papers. The summary and minutes of the PISG and the PITG meetings would need to be agreed by the appropriate group before the PISG actioned their publication on the HESA website.

4.3. It was felt that some meeting papers that were confidential or sensitive should be exempt from publication. Similarly, those papers that related to policy in development or work in progress by PITG should be exempt from immediate publication. However, it would be intended that the latter were published in retrospect when an appropriate stage of development was reached and/or an informed and contextualised evidence base had been established.

4.4. The secretariat was asked to mark suggestions of such exemption in their preparation of meeting papers for the PISG and the PITG. In relation to PISG papers, the suggested exemptions would in future be considered by the PISG within the course of their meetings. Though not discussed explicitly, the implicit expectation was that once the PITG deemed an area of their work complete they would recommend to the PISG that the set of meeting papers related to that area of their work were no longer subject to the exemption and could be published. Such publication would be agreed by the PISG.

Action: PISG to agree these July 2011 minutes at their next meeting before publication by HESA on their website alongside the March 2011 PISG meeting summary and the July 2011 PISG non-exempt meeting papers.

Action: PISG to agree by correspondence the papers from this July 2011 meeting that were and were not exempt from publication.

Action: HESA to publish the agreed non-exempt papers from this July 2011 meeting on their website alongside the March 2011 PISG meeting summary, followed by these July 2011 minutes and the June 2011 PITG minutes in due course.

Action: Secretariat to mark a suggestion of a paper's potential to be exempt from publication (or immediate publication) in their preparation of future meeting papers for the PISG and the PITG.

5. Amended terms of reference

(PISG 11/05)

5.1. HF introduced the paper and noted that the draft terms of reference for both the PISG and the PITG had previously been considered by the two groups. The amended draft now incorporated a small number of modifications and refinements that had been recommended by the groups.

5.2. HESA noted that use of terminology relating to benchmarks required particular care and consideration. This aspect of the PIs was highlighted as being central to the development, use and interpretation of the PIs. It was recommended that current references to a “performance indicator” should be taken to mean a “PI and its benchmark”, and that a footnote be used to capture this within the terms of reference.

Action: Secretariat to amend the terms of reference to include a footnote stating that references throughout to a “performance indicator” should be taken to mean a “PI and its benchmark”.

6. Role, relevance and potential future discussions of the Performance Indicators Steering Group

(PISG 11/06)

6.1. HF introduced the paper and noted that the secretariat had sought contributions from members in preparation of the paper. Members who had not made a contribution at that time were invited to make their contributions orally. Key points from members’ discussions are below:

a. The PIs were a UK-wide measure and an ability to align with a UK-wide indicator was valuable for the devolved administrations. Though the PIs could serve a purpose and be useful in respect of local issues, they were provided with some boundaries and shelter from local issues by maintaining a UK focus, and this strengthened the measures.

b. The institutional focus of the PIs was known to be valued by institutions and others, with the institutional level measures being useful tools for an institution in respect to their own management, strategy and governance. There was seen to be an overlap with HEPISG and the institutional data provided by the PIs helped to serve the public information and access agendas, as well as having a role in quality assurance and accountability.

c. While the trends and time series that the PI publications could facilitate were useful, the benchmarks that accompanied each indicator were particularly valuable. Members noted that although the devolved administrations had their own sets of indicators relating to the performance of their HE sector, as well as resources such as HEIDI, the Unistats website and the forthcoming KIS, comparisons derived from these were not necessarily meaningful across the devolved administrations in the way that those derived from the PIs and their benchmarks could be. However, members noted the importance of the benchmarks’ ability to fully capture the characteristics that they sought to account for.

d. The PIs were a consistent set of measures, which could provide useful context by way of the splits by mode and level within the table series. The in-year nature of the PIs was important to note, along with their suitability for tracking changes through time and the contrast in this respect to longitudinal participation measures.

e. The PIs had a wide range of users who would be making use of the measures for a range of different purposes. In the context of the increased volume of information available to users in more recent years, both the users and their purposes were likely to have

changed since the introduction of the PIs and their original design. Members felt that it was likely that information had been lost regarding the evidence behind the indicators, that the utility of some of them might no longer be as great as it was when they were created, that they had strengths as well as weaknesses, and that the PIs were under-utilised as a result. A program of work to address awareness, understanding and potential uses of the PIs was proposed.

6.2. Members felt that there was value in maintaining a set of indicators that were UK-wide, operating at an institutional level, consistent, and benchmarked. Having discussed that the PIs were useful measures, they also acknowledged their limitations, in terms of their application to wider policy; their visibility; and their potential gaps given the recent changes to the HE sector.

6.3. In the context of the changes it was important that the PIs continued to be meaningful measures and that recognition was made of the potential for their use in conjunction with other performance measures. To this end, the group identified three strands of work:

- i. Development of a communications strategy with respect to the PIs to improve visibility, awareness and understanding of the measures. In particular this work should focus on providing accessible information regarding their use and context.

Action: The PITG to provide initial advice to the PISG on the potential for improvements to be made to the contextual information and commentary published alongside the PIs on HESA's website.

- ii. The establishing of a process for reviewing groups of PIs in turn, on a two to three year rolling basis. The reviews should ask fundamental questions about how meaningful the indicators were to different users; consider changes, or potential changes, to the context and the data underlying the PIs; and seek to develop the indicators in alignment with the characteristics of National Statistics (which was desirable from a reputational perspective).

Action: The PITG to undertake an initial analysis of the WP and the research PIs, highlighting issues related to these groups of indicators as well as emerging context. At their next meeting the PISG would consider a consultative approach to a review, informed by the PITG's early analysis.

- iii. Identification of gaps in the coverage of the PIs. This was expected to consider questions related to desirable coverage of the PIs; current omissions in coverage; user interests and requirements; and demands related to external changes in the UK HE sector. Members highlighted some initial areas for consideration as:

- a. Challenges for the PIs arising in relation to HE provision delivered by FECs and other alternative providers in England.
- b. Nuances related to coverage of existing indicators, in particular the state school indicator.
- c. Commonalities existing between measures used by PISG member organisations that are in addition to the PIs.
- d. Potential for the development and introduction of an indicator related to household residual income.

- e. Potential for the incorporation within the PIs of existing measures developed in relation to Higher Education Management Statistics (HEMS), Estate Management Statistics (EMS), the UUK efficiencies project and others.

Action: The PITG to provide advice to the PISG on the technical challenges related to the incorporation within the PIs of HE provision delivered by FECs and other alternative providers.

Action: PISG members to draft thoughts relating to each of i. to iii. above to assist the PITG.

6.4. In principle members agreed to the discontinuation of table T6 – Module completion rates, produced only for HEIs in Wales – on the basis that this measure was believed to have been superseded. Given the PIs' status as official statistics, HEFCW and HESA would work together to clarify the process for discontinuation of the indicator. This was likely to involve a soft consultation with Welsh HEIs for information, and an announcement of the decision on the HESA website.

Action: HESA to seek clarification of the process for discontinuation of table T6 from the code of practice for official statistics and liaise with HEFCW colleagues including Hannah Falvey.

7. Report from the Performance Indicators Technical Group (Oral and minutes from June 2011 PITG meeting)

7.1. JW reported to the group. He noted that the minutes of the meeting had intended to provide greater narrative regarding the discussions had by the PITG, and members agreed that a good balance had been achieved.

7.2. As the minutes of the PITG meeting outlined, the initial analysis so far undertaken by the group in respect of A level subject information had resulted in no conclusive position being reached. They felt unable to recommend the method so far considered by their analysis on the basis that it had shown a very limited and not significant impact. Alternative methods were now being considered in respect to this area of work: they would be considered by the PITG at their November meeting and JW would have further feedback for the PISG at their next meeting. PISG members noted that this was a topical area and that there was value in development of a thorough analysis to underpin future decision making.

7.3. With regard to the inclusion of A* and other new grades in the existing PI populations, timelines for the PITG to make a recommendation to the PISG were reported to be challenging. The PITG were keen to undertake an evidence based assessment to ensure consistent inclusion across different groups of indicators and this required data that was not yet available. While an interim recommendation may be to treat A* grades as A grades in the first year, the group were exploring with UCAS the potential to gain further details that might enable an evidence based recommendation to be made earlier. For example, regarding the numbers of students with A and A* A level grades as well as the number with no A levels. The sub-group would provide a recommendation at the next meeting of the PISG.

Action: The PITG to continue their programmes of work in respect of A level subject information and of the inclusion of A* and other new grades in the existing PI populations. JW to provide further feedback and recommendations from these areas of work to the PISG at their next meeting.

7.4. The PITG had also considered differences between the PI populations and HESA's standard registration population. The potential to align the two populations had been discussed, with the group agreeing to recommend alignment of some definitions. However, they noted that

the populations were different in respect of other definitions for reasons that continued to be valid, and that alignment was not appropriate here. Members noted that the different indicators considered different cohorts within the PI population, and that any changes to the population definition would be applied across all of the indicators.

7.5. The PISG agreed the two recommendations made to them by the PITG in respect of students domiciled in the Channel Islands and the Isle of Man, and students registered at a UK institution and studying overseas. They would receive a recommendation in respect of students on low credit bearing courses following further analysis and consideration of this issue by the PITG at their next meeting.

8. Timeline of the introduction and development of the Performance Indicators (PISG 11/07)

8.1. MG introduced the paper, noting that the timeline provided was largely for information. Members were invited to note that the results of the last review of the PIs were published in 2007: at that time some extension to existing indicators had been proposed, along with one or two new indicators. The changes that have occurred in the interim period were highlighted, including changes to: data sources; alternative and complementary measures of performance; and HE funding arrangements. The group felt that any future review of the PIs should seek to draw together the full range of measures that may be appropriate or of interest in relation to the performance of the UK HE sector.

9. Date of next meeting

9.1. The group noted that their terms of reference directed them to meet one or two times per year, and that in the longer term a March meeting of the group would be well timed in respect of the publication of the PIs. However the substantial changes being introduced to and experienced by the UK HE sector in the current year created a need for an earlier meeting of the group in its first year. The group would prefer to meet again before Christmas 2011, with dates to be agreed by correspondence.

9.2. Members noted that the PITG would next meet in November 2011. It followed that a December meeting of the PISG would reduce the volume of work that the PITG would be able to undertake in the interim time available and that the subgroup may not be in a position to report back to the PISG in full. The PITG were directed to progress as far as possible with one or two priorities if time pressures did not allow their full remit to be undertaken.

10. Meeting closed 15.30pm