

# Review of the widening participation and research performance indicators

## PISG 12/02

### Issue

1. In July 2011 the Performance Indicators Steering Group (PISG) discussed the role, relevance and potential future discussions of the PISG. At that time the group recognised the value of the Performance Indicators (PIs), but noted that in the context of recent changes to the HE sector, it was important that the PIs continued to be meaningful measures and that a process for reviewing the different sets of PIs would need to be established.
2. After considering the different sets of PIs the Steering Group requested that the Performance Indicators Technical Group (PITG) highlight any known issues and emerging context relating to the Widening Participation (WP) and Research PIs to inform the development of such a review.

### Outcomes

3. The Performance Indicators Steering Group are asked to consider:
  - a. The known issues and emerging context relating to the WP and research PIs as highlighted to them by the PITG.
  - b. The priorities and intentions for the WP indicators – whether their focus should be on educational or social disadvantage or a combination of both – such that the PITG may provide further advice on these indicators where necessary.
  - c. The process, form and scope of any review of the PIs.
  - d. The balance and nature of input to a review process required from the PISG and the PITG.
  - e. The potential outcomes of a review of the PIs.

### Discussion

#### July 2011 meeting of the PISG

4. At the July 2011 meeting of the PISG the group discussed the role, relevance and potential future discussions of the PISG<sup>1</sup>. They noted that in the context of recent changes to the HE sector, it was important that the PIs continued to be meaningful measures and that a process for reviewing the PIs should be established.
5. Members agreed that any review process 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 Official Statistics (which was desirable from a reputational perspective).
6. They proposed a process for reviewing groups of PIs in turn, on a two to three year rolling basis. At that time it was requested that the Performance Indicators Technical Group

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<sup>1</sup> See minutes of the last meeting (29 July 2011).

(PITG) highlight any known issues and emerging context relating to the Widening Participation (WP) and Research PIs to inform the development of such a review.

#### November 2011 meeting of the PITG

7. The PITG discussed an initial analysis of the WP and research PIs at their November 2011 meeting. Having undertaken the work that was requested of them, the PITG invite the PISG to consider the known issues and emerging context highlighted in Annex A to this paper. PITG members believe this to be a comprehensive analysis of both sets of PIs.

**Outcome:** The PISG have considered the known issues and emerging context relating to the WP and research PIs as highlighted to them by the PITG.

8. The PITG's discussion highlighted the following additional points for the PISG to consider:

- i. The development of any review would need to be alert to the Official Statistics requirements: in particular the PISG should ensure that the chosen review process provides appropriate coverage in terms of users and usages. The review should therefore be very clear on its purposes and objectives.
- ii. A rolling review process may be more able to capture current positions and usages, but a more comprehensive review process may be better able to address issues that span the different groups of indicators and capture a complete picture of how users engage with the PIs. Workload implications should be borne in mind in relation to either review process, but the PISG may wish to further consider the most appropriate process for the review given their own understanding of its purposes and objectives.
- iii. An ability to maintain a UK-wide perspective in the development of a review would be of particular importance given that the recent changes to the HE sector differed across the four UK nations, and the PISG's desire to maintain a set of indicators that were consistent on a UK-wide basis.
- iv. The PITG would welcome clarification on the chosen review process, and the likely nature of further input required from the PITG, following discussion and any decisions made by the PISG at this meeting.
- v. In relation to the WP indicators, the PITG would welcome clarification from the PISG as to their priorities and intentions for the PIs. That is, do the PISG intend that the WP indicators should seek to provide a measure of educational disadvantage, social disadvantage or a combination of both?

**Outcome:** The PISG to have considered the priorities and intentions for the WP indicators – whether their focus should be on educational disadvantage, social disadvantage or a combination of both – such that the PITG may provide further advice on these indicators where necessary.

- vi. In relation to the research indicators, the PITG requested that the secretariat revisit the findings of the 2006 review of the PIs to seek insight regarding the perceptions of these indicators by other users. PITG members would consider what other sources might be explored to enhance understanding of institutional and other usage of the research PIs and provide further advice in due course.

## 2006 review of the PIs

9. The secretariat has now revisited the 2006 review<sup>2</sup> of the PIs in relation to vi. above and findings relating to the WP and research PIs.

10. The 2006 review was taken forward by a sub-group of the PISG who: agreed the consultation document's content in terms of the description of the principles that PIs should possess; the set of criteria that was to be used by respondents to assess any new indicators; oversaw the analysis of responses to the consultation; and agreed the contents of a report detailing outcomes and decisions of the review.

11. In terms of the approach taken by the 2006 review, the PISG decided at that time that all stakeholders in the indicators should be given the opportunity to contribute to this review, and a consultation document was produced which assessed the entirety of the existing indicators as well as a range of potential new indicators<sup>3</sup>. Both HE institutions and other stakeholders were invited to respond: 91 responses were received from institutions and 19 from other bodies (including individual academics; Government, sector and independent bodies).

12. The consultation achieved largely positive responses, and led to the retention of the existing indicators in their current form with some recommendations for possible extensions to different cohorts. No indicators were discontinued. Since the 2006 review, work has been undertaken in respect to each of the potential new indicators identified by that review but the position has not yet been reached that all issues with those indicators have been addressed and their introduction is possible.

13. In relation to the WP indicators the 2006 review made only the following recommendation to the low participation neighbourhood (LPN) indicators:

“As these are based on an out of date classification (Super Profiles low participation data), they need to be replaced as soon as possible. There are two suggested replacements, and it is recommended that both should be produced, provided that definitions can be synchronised across the UK in order to provide robust and comparable values.”

14. Following several discussions the PISG decided that a replacement based on the Index of Multiple Deprivation could not achieve UK-wide synchronisation, and decided that one based on the POLAR methodology was appropriate. This was introduced in the 2008 publication of the PIs.

15. In relation to the research PIs the 2006 review found that the research indicators were less widely reported on or used than any of the other indicators. They were mentioned in responses to the consultation more often than any other indicators as being of no use. However, in view of work going on elsewhere at the time on research metrics and metrics for third-stream funding the review concluded that:

“any suggestions for indicators in the knowledge transfer or business in the community areas should not be considered at present.”

and

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<sup>2</sup> More information on the 2006 review is available at <http://www.hefce.ac.uk/learning/perfind/>.

<sup>3</sup> The potential new indicators were ones on students' backgrounds (parental income, parental education and quality of the school attended) and one on job quality.

“any final decision about the research indicators should be postponed until more is known about the way metrics for research funding are going to be developed.”

16. No decisions have been made by the PISG about the future of the research indicators since the 2006 review of the PIs. The understanding of institutional and other usage of these indicators still remains unclear.

#### The process, form and scope of a review of the PIs

17. The PISG proposed at their July 2011 meeting that a review of the PIs may consider groups of PIs in turn, on a two to three year rolling basis. The PITG invite the PISG to note the Official Statistics requirements that the users and usages of the PIs should be as fully understood as possible, and consider how a review may best capture a more complete picture of how users engage with the PIs.

18. Members will note from the information provided to them by the PITG that a number of issues have been highlighted in relation to each set of PIs that the PITG have so far considered, and that these issues have been found to be wide ranging. Will the implementation of a review process be more manageable or effective if sets of indicators are reviewed one at a time? To what extent should the value that exists in capturing current positions and usages be prioritised?

19. However, the issues identified have also been found to have the potential to span and interact with different sets of indicators and the PITG noted that a rolling review process would need to be very carefully developed if it were to be sufficiently comprehensive to appreciate issues or usages that span different groups of indicators. It may be plausible that an extension to coverage of postgraduate cohorts within the WP indicators is explored, for example. How great is the risk that a rolling review process may fail to appreciate the interactions of this issue with more than one set of PIs? How achievable is a review process whereby addressing the issue of such an extension within a review of the WP indicators now would enable simplification in terms of exploring or proposing the same extensions within a future review of the retention indicators?

20. The PITG also noted that an ability to maintain a UK-wide perspective in the development of a review would be of particular importance given that the recent changes to the HE sector differed across the four UK nations, and given the PISG's desire to maintain a set of indicators that were consistent on a UK-wide basis. The PISG are invited to bear this in mind when considering the range of users and stakeholders with which the review will engage, and the most appropriate form of a review to facilitate this engagement. For example the review could be a web-based survey or consultation document alone, it could incorporate face-to-face interviews or focus groups with stakeholders or utilise other methods.

21. The PISG are also invited to consider the scope of a review in the context of its purposes and objectives. Will the review seek only to pose a series of questions about the usage, appropriateness or interpretation of the existing indicators? To what extent will the review seek to address any issues relating to the benchmarks or contextual information that are published with the PIs? Will it propose modifications to the existing set of indicators or additions to them? Invite respondents to identify any gaps or perceived gaps in the coverage of the PIs? Clarify user engagement within or across groups of indicators?

**Outcome:** The PISG to have considered the process, form and scope of a review of the PIs.

#### The balance and nature of input to a review process required from the PISG and the PITG

22. The PISG are invited consider the role of both themselves and the PITG in the development and undertaking of a review of the PIs. Members may wish to consider the level of input and control that they wish to be retained by the PISG, and that they may wish to delegate to, or share with, the PITG. Particular responsibilities for consideration may include (the list below is not intended to be exhaustive):

- Definition of the purposes and objectives of the review.
- Descriptions of PIs and their purposes, intended qualities and characteristics to be included in any review documentation.
- Acknowledgement of known users and usages.
- Question design and development of proposals.
- Resourcing of the review.
- PI users' and stakeholders' engagement in the review process.
- Analysis of responses.
- Development of conclusions and recommendations.

**Outcome:** The PISG to have considered the balance and nature of input to a review process required from the PISG and the PITG

#### The potential outcomes of a review of the PIs

23. The PISG are invited to consider the potential outcomes of a review of the PIs. The review is likely to pose a series of questions about the use, appropriateness and interpretation of the existing indicators and any proposed modifications including the introduction of new indicators. Is it possible, likely or desirable that the review will again lead to retention of the existing indicators in their current form; or an outcome at the other end of the spectrum whereby the PIs are completely redefined? Is there a position within this spectrum that the PISG believes is desirable or achievable?

**Outcome:** The PISG to have considered the potential outcomes of a review of the PIs.

### **Further information**

24. For further information contact Mark Gittoes (Phone 0117 931 7052; email [m.gittoes@hefce.ac.uk](mailto:m.gittoes@hefce.ac.uk)) or Alison Brunt (Phone 0117 931 7166; email [a.brunt@hefce.ac.uk](mailto:a.brunt@hefce.ac.uk))

## **Annex A**

### **Initial analysis of the WP and research Performance Indicators**

**PITG 11/06**

#### **Issue**

1. PISG have asked PITG to highlight any historical issues that they are aware of, alongside any emerging context for the Widening Participation and Research Performance Indicators.

#### **Outcomes**

2. The Performance Indicators Technical Group to provide advice to the Performance Indicators Steering Group on any historical issues alongside any emerging context:

- a. relating to the Widening Participation Performance Indicators;
- b. relating to the Research Performance Indicators.

#### **Discussion**

##### **Performance Indicators Steering Group (PISG)**

3. At the July 2011 meeting, the PISG considered the role, relevance and potential future discussions of the PISG<sup>4</sup>. Following those discussions, the PISG decided that an initial analysis of the WP and research PIs should be undertaken by PITG.

4. Therefore PISG have asked PITG to highlight any historical issues that they are aware of, alongside any emerging context for the two sets of indicators.

5. Informed by this PITG analysis, PISG will consider a consultative approach to a review for the two sets of indicators.

6. This paper only covers the indicators themselves. The associated benchmarks are not considered here and PITG may wish to advise PISG on the scope of any review process with regard to the benchmarks.

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<sup>4</sup> See PISG 11/06 for further details.

## Initial analysis of the WP Performance Indicators

### Current coverage

7. The current WP Performance Indicators are published in two groups of tables.
8. The first group (Table 1x) provide information on young full-time undergraduates and provide measures relating to:
  - a. Proportion of entrants from state schools;
  - b. Proportion of entrants from specified socio-economic classes; and
  - c. Proportion of entrants from low participation (HE) neighbourhoods.
9. The second group (Table 2x) provide information on mature full-time and part-time undergraduate entrants and a single measure is examined for both:
  - a. Proportion of entrants who hold no previous HE qualification prior to entry and come from a low participation (HE) neighbourhood.

### Historical issues

10. The PITG are asked to highlight any known historical issues to PISG relating to the Widening Participation indicators. Listed below are some of the potential issues that PITG might wish to consider:

#### General

- a. The institutional coverage of the Performance Indicators is limited to those institutions who report their registered students to HESA. Therefore provision registered at Further Education colleges is not currently included in any Performance Indicator reporting. Although this isn't a significant issue for the Research indicators (due to the low level of research activity within FECs), there is significant interest in the undergraduate activity registered at FECs and hence an interest in the widening participation and retention/completion characteristics of FEC provision.
- b. Two of the three current indicators focus on educational disadvantage only (POLAR and state schools). The remaining indicator is itself a fairly blunt measure of disadvantage. The existing indicators are therefore sometimes criticised for being too narrow in their focus with preferences being expressed for more general measures of disadvantage such as the index of multiple deprivation, such measures have been considered and rejected in the past but are likely to be raised again in the future.

#### NS-SEC indicators

- c. For the 2008/09 academic year, UCAS changed the question that informs NS-SEC<sup>5</sup> for the majority of applicants. The question reverted back to the original wording for 2009/10 applicants. The change in question between 2007/08 and 2008/09 had an impact on the NS-SEC indicators, causing the proportion of students classified as 'unknown' and those classified as falling into NS-SEC groups 4 to 7 to rise. This meant that there is discontinuity in the NS-SEC indicator time series.

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<sup>5</sup> National Statistics Socio-economic Classification.

d. Many have questioned the robustness and reliability of the NS-SEC classification due to the reliance on the wording of the question asked and the decisions of the respondent. Since 2009, UCAS have not been publically providing NS-SEC data. They took the decision to publish the data around the participation in higher education using a low participation neighbourhood approach instead.

e. There remains a high level of unknowns in the NS-SEC indicators. For example, in Table 1a published 2011, around 20 per cent of young students (46 thousand) had an unknown NS-SEC. This compares to around 0.6 per cent for the equivalent low participation neighbourhood indicator.

#### Low participation indicators

f. From 2007/08 onwards, low participation data has not been produced for institutions in Scotland. The low participation measure used in Tables T1, T2 and T3b is based on a UK wide classification of areas into participation bands. The relatively high (in UK terms) participation rate in Scotland coupled with the very high proportion of HE that occurs in FE colleges means that the figures for Scottish institutions could, when viewed in isolation, misrepresent their contribution to widening participation.

g. A similar argument has in the past been put forward by some London institutions where there are fewer low participation areas. They suggest that this is due to the success of London institutions in having increased and widened participation rates, and hence are being penalised due to the circularity of the low participation measure: the more local students they attract, the less local low participation students are available. The location-adjusted benchmark was partially introduced to ameliorate this.

h. The current low participation bands are based on the POLAR2.0 classification, which is based on the HE participation rates of people who were aged 18 between 2000 and 2004 and entered a HE course in a UK higher education institution or GB further education college, aged 18 or 19, between academic years 2000/01 and 2005/06. Given that data on academic year 2009/10 is now available, the classification may need updating (depending on the rate of change of areas). Also newly introduced postcodes will not be classified and produce areas with unknown classifications (however, as noted above, the level of unknowns is very low at 0.6 per cent for Table 1a).

#### State school indicators

i. There is no single classification of school codes (as based on PREVINST). Schools can potentially have multiple PREVINST codes (i.e. codes relating to using a UCAS coding system, and also a DfE coding system). As the classification for each school comes from the body whose coding system is being used, it is possible for the same school to be coded as state school in one system, and non state school in another.

j. The use of a state versus non-state school split has, by some, been seen as a coarse measure of school differences. For example a number of state school are highly selective and therefore not entirely comparable to schools in the same state school grouping. There may be other school groupings that could be used.



## Emerging context

11. The PITG are also asked to highlight any emerging context that they are aware of that relates to the Widening Participation indicators. Listed below are some of the potential topics that PITG might wish to consider:

- a. The increases in direct fee charging to students across the whole of the UK means there is a greater need for monitoring of changes to the student profile (particularly with regard to widening participation);
- b. There are now increasing opportunities for administrative data sets to be linked together. These linked datasets may allow for alternative and/or more sophisticated indicators to be developed. For England, these opportunities may be re-enforced by any changes to the data regulation regime.
- c. The changes to the HE system in England mean that provision may grow in non-HEI providers (including both FECs and alternative providers). The Performance Indicators may need to accounting for and acknowledge this provision.
- d. The use of the Widening Participation indicators in OFFA Access Agreements in England;
- e. One of the main drivers for Performance Indicators is to focus on under-represented groups across the whole of higher education. However another focus is unevenness of under-represented groups within higher education. Given the 2012 changes, there may be a increased focus on an uneven distribution and this may lead to consideration of other indicators (such as those relating to particular ethnic groups and other equality measures).
- f. BIS have consulted on and changed their headline statistic for reporting on widening participation across the English sector. Rather than reporting on Full-time Young Participation by Socio-Economic group (FYPSEC), they now produce an analysis of progression rates to HE for young people split by free school meal receipt and school type;
- g. PITG members are asked to explicitly consider emerging context from the devolved nations.

**Outcome:** The Performance Indicators Technical Group to provide advice to the Performance Indicators Steering Group on any historical issues alongside any emerging context relating to the Widening Participation Performance Indicators.

*Please refer to paragraphs 7.5 to 7.7 of the minutes of the PITG meeting on 25 November 2011 for the PITG's discussion of the initial analysis of the WP performance indicators.*

## Initial analysis of the Research Performance Indicators

### Current coverage

12. The current research indicators are based on two measures of input and two measures of output and are as follows:

- a. Proportion of PhDs awarded per proportion of academic staff costs

- b. Proportion of PhDs awarded per proportion of funding council quality-related research (QR) funding allocation for research
- c. Proportion of research grants and contracts obtained per proportion of academic staff costs
- d. Proportion of research grants and contracts obtained per proportion of funding council QR funding allocation for research.

### **Historical issues**

13. The PITG are asked to highlight any known historical issues to PISG relating to the Research indicators. Listed below are some of the potential issues that PITG might wish to consider:

- a. It is unclear what the rationale for the measures are and therefore whether or not they are fit for purpose. Are they attempting to measure efficiency, quality, productivity etc?
- b. There is no visible transparent use of the Research Performance Indicators and therefore the level of usage could be questioned (unlike the other indicators where they are used in a variety of ways by the wider public/press). The currently available information on web-usage does not provide a clear picture.
- c. The measures are based on separating each of the inputs and outputs into appropriate cost centres. There is variation across institutions into how cost centre information is reported and so the measures may not be consistent for different institutions. Institutions may also choose to record associated factors used in the measures in different cost centres within a single institution.
- d. No robust separation of expenditure on research from that on teaching is possible for academic staff costs apart from potentially TRAC. Therefore the measures used do not necessarily form a robust picture of research productivity.
- e. Some of the measures are based on assuming that funding council QR allocations are spent in the same way they are allocated. However such funds form part of the block grant, which institutions are free to distribute internally as they see fit. QR funding is also a very particular stream of funding and it is unclear of the link between this particular stream and the output measures considered.
- f. The nature of the Research Performance Indicators are very different to other indicators, which are more student focused. As a result, information on the characteristics and success of postgraduate students is not included in either the Research or other Performance Indicators. For example, although the retention and Widening Participation Performance Indicators cover undergraduate measures, they have no postgraduate coverage.

### **Emerging context**

14. The PITG are also asked to highlight any emerging context that they are aware of that relates to the Research indicators. Listed below are some of the potential topics that PITG might wish to consider:

- a. The increases in direct fee charging to students across the whole of the UK means there is a greater need for monitoring of changes to the future behaviour of potential

postgraduate students (for example rates of progression from undergraduate to postgraduate provision) and subsequent postgraduate profile (particularly with regard to widening participation);

- b. The move from the Research Assessment Exercise to the Research Excellence Framework may mean that alternative and additional indicators of research may be higher profile, none of the current indicators are part of the standard suite of analysis for the REF;
- c. There is increased interest in providing more information to potential postgraduate students through similar mechanisms to those being developed for undergraduate students (such as Unistats, the Key Information Set, the National Student Survey);
- d. PITG members are asked to explicitly consider emerging context from the devolved nations.

**Outcome:** The Performance Indicators Technical Group to provide advice to the Performance Indicators Steering Group on any historical issues alongside any emerging context relating to the Research Performance Indicators.

*Please refer to paragraphs 7.8 to 7.10 of the minutes of the PITG meeting on 25 November 2011 for the PITG's discussion of the initial analysis of the research performance indicators.*