

## **Performance Indicators Steering Group**

Minutes of the Performance Indicators Steering Group held at 13.30 on Friday, 20 January 2012  
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
	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
	Jonathan Waller	HESA
	Daniel Walker	UCAS (attending on behalf of Bethanie Williams)
Secretariat:	Alison Brunt	HEFCE
	Mark Gittoes	HEFCE

<b>Apologies:</b>	Awaiting nomination	Department for Education and Learning, Northern Ireland (DEL)
	Paul Rasch	Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (BIS)

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

1.1. Following introductions, the chair welcomed members to the meeting and gave apologies received from DEL and BIS.

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

2.1. The minutes were accepted as a true and accurate record of the meeting.

### **3. Matters arising**

3.1. Members were invited to note that at their July meeting they had requested that the Performance Indicators Technical Group (PITG) provide them with advice on the technical challenges related to the incorporation within the Performance Indicators (PIs) of higher education (HE) provision delivered by further education colleges (FECs) and other alternative providers. JW noted that this remained an outstanding action: on account of the agenda of the

PITG's November 2011 meeting being full, and issues relating to the HE regulatory framework still emerging, the PITG had postponed this work and would revisit it in due course.

3.2. The group agreed that it was sensible for this work to decouple FECs from other alternative providers of HE. They noted that harmonisation of student data across those registered at higher education institutions (HEIs) and FECs may develop more quickly in England on account of requirements of the Student Loans Company (SLC) in respect of data for those students registered at FECs.

Action: The PITG to provide advice to the PISG on the technical challenges related to the incorporation within the PIs of HE provision registered at FECs.

Action: When clarity is available in respect of the HE regulatory framework, the PITG to provide advice to the PISG on the technical challenges related to the incorporation within the PIs of HE provision registered at other alternative providers.

#### **4. Report from the Performance Indicators Technical Group (Oral and PITG minutes from November 2011)**

4.1. JW reported to the group on the matters discussed by the PITG at their November 2011 meeting that were not arising on the agenda of this meeting.

- (a) Though the impact of the England student number control policy was not yet fully known, the PITG had recognised that institutions in England had been incentivised to improve their qualifications on entry data through the introduction of unconstrained recruitment of students who held entry qualifications that were equivalent to, or higher than, AAB achieved at A level. It was believed that a consequence would be enhanced qualifications on entry data, in terms of both quantity and quality. This may particularly be the case for mature entrants, and may not necessarily be the case for entrants to HEIs in Wales, Scotland or Northern Ireland.

JW and MG explained the potential impacts on benchmarks for both English and other UK HEIs. Since benchmarks were calculated across all UK HEIs it was possible that benchmarks for institutions in Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland would increase disproportionately to any increase in their indicators. The group noted that there was no action that could be taken here beyond the inclusion of an explanatory note or caveat within the publication of the PIs.

Members recognised that there were existing incentives for institutions outside of England to improve the quality of their qualifications on entry data which may serve to lessen any impacts, particularly in the longer term. In particular, changes to HESA data collections would highlight guidance and requirements for more data in respect to qualifications held on entry, and all UK institutions were expected to respond to this to the best of their ability. There was believed to be the potential to further highlight issues in this area, and HESA training events for the sector were suggested as an example of such opportunities.

Action: HEFCE and HESA to draft an explanatory note for inclusion within the PIs publication outlining any changes that may have resulted from the England student number control policy in relation to the PIs and their benchmarks.

- (b) As agreed by the PISG at their July 2011 meeting, some alignment of the PI populations with the HESA standard registration population had been introduced. The PITG had now

fully considered students on low credit bearing courses, including the coverage of the reduced returns required for them and the completeness of their data. They were recommending to the PISG that all such students should be included within the PI populations. The PISG agreed the recommendation: while there would be some increase in the numbers of unknowns, there had been found to be no material impact on the PIs or their benchmarks, and the group recognised that their previous exclusion may have been missing a useful part of the population.

Action: HESA to implement inclusion of all students on low credit bearing courses in PI populations.

- (c) The PITG had previously made an interim recommendation to the PISG that the A\* grades awarded at A level which would appear in HESA data from 2010-11 onwards be treated as an A grade in the short term. The group had now considered further evidence, and found that issues such as deferred entry made attempting to disentangle different A and A\* grades complicated and risky. The PISG agreed that the PITG's interim decision be implemented for the 2012 publication of the PIs, and that it should be reconsidered for the 2013 publication. Members were invited to note that improvements were expected in relation to evidence available from UCAS on new qualifications entering the UCAS tariff in future.

Action: HESA to implement treatment of students achieving A\* grades at A level as A grades in qualification on entry groupings for benchmarks.

- (d) The introduction and coverage of a new categorisation of qualifications on entry data was outlined to the group, who noted the interaction of this categorisation with the existing one. The changes and mappings required in relation to these categorisations were considered further in the PITG minutes from their November 2011 meeting, and members were invited to note that continuity and parity had been sought as far as possible. The PISG agreed the recommended changes.

Action: HESA to implement the proposed technical changes to the qualification on entry benchmarking groups.

- (e) Investigations into the potential discontinuation of table T6 of the PIs (module completion rates, calculated for Welsh HEIs only) had found that the table was neither required nor used by HEFCW or any of the Welsh HEIs who had responded to HESA's enquiries. The group agreed that it was appropriate to comply with guidance from the National Statistician's office, which indicated that such a discontinuation should be announced in the previous release of the statistic. The PISG agreed that the table would not be produced from the 2013 publication onwards,

Action: HESA to include within the 2012 publication of the PIs an announcement of the discontinuation of table T6 from 2013 onwards.

## **5. Benchmarks and A level subject information (PISG 12/01)**

5.1. HF introduced the paper and noted that the PISG had previously requested advice and evidence from the PITG in relation to this issue. The PITG had now undertaken a considerable programme of work in this area, and the paper provided further evidence. The PITG were reported to have considered an exhaustive range of approaches for the inclusion of A level

subject information in the PI benchmark calculations, as well as impacts of these approaches on a range of indicators and a range of institutions.

5.2. JW invited the group to note that the significance statuses were key to understanding the impact and interpretation, and to consider Table 5b of paper PITG 11/06. Location was shown by the table to have been a justified addition on account of its impact, but the table showed that each of the methods considered in relation to incorporating A level subject information had a very low impact. Minimal changes had been observed across all indicators and all institutions with the inclusion of A level subject information in the benchmark calculations.

5.3. The group were alerted to the potential to cause detriment to the benchmarks. They were directed to paragraph 20 of the paper which explained that introducing a new factor to the benchmarks would mean a substantial increase to the number of benchmarking categorisations, and that more of these would be smaller in size. Given that the guiding principles of the benchmarks would be contravened on account of A level subject information having no proven association with what is being measured, the benchmarks would be unnecessarily diluted by such greater segmentation. The group recognised that the ability of the PIs and their benchmarks to usefully assess performance would be compromised. It was on this basis that the PISG endorsed the recommendation of the PITG that A level subject area information should not be included in the PI benchmarks.

5.4. Members discussed the approach that they would take to disseminate the work and the findings in this area. They noted that the PITG's work provided strong evidence to persuade that there was no case for including A level subject information in the benchmark calculations, and expressed thanks to the PITG for their very thorough and sophisticated work. That there was political interest in this area was highlighted and members also felt that there was a need to make clear that student choice should not be confused with institutional performance: issues relating to student choice were being taken forward in other arenas and were not a responsibility of the PIs. Given that the issue was a long-term one, they felt that the evidence should be publically available, and that it would need greater visibility than simple inclusion within the published PISG and the PITG minutes and meeting papers.

5.5. Members agreed that they would investigate the scope for UUK to assist in disseminating the evidence through its incorporation into an appropriate forum. GP agreed to take this forward with UUK. The group also felt that it would be appropriate for the PISG to release a statement at the time of release of the first tranche of the PIs. Such a statement could be published on the appropriate website(s); should reflect on the evidence considered and the decision made by the PISG; and should be supported by this paper being available on the HESA website. The group expressed a desire for the statement to also outline the key areas of the PISG's and the PITG's consideration over the last year, and for such a statement to then be produced annually. It was noted that they may need to be sensitive to Official Statistics conditions in the preparation and release of any such statement. In particular, the group should seek guidance as to its form and whether it should be released by the PISG, HESA or the chair of the PISG.

Action: UUK to assist in disseminating the evidence and decision made by the PISG in relation to incorporating A level subject information into the PI benchmarks.

Action: HESA to seek guidance from the National Statistician's office as to the form and release of any statement to accompany the publication of Tranche 1 of the PIs.

Action: Secretariat to draft a statement for PISG to release at the time of the, to be agreed by the chair of the PISG and the PISG by correspondence.

## **6. Review of the WP and Research Performance Indicators (PISG 12/02)**

6.1. HF introduced the paper and highlighted the history and context of the group's previous discussions relating to the need for a review of the PIs. It was noted that the PITG had considered a range of issues related to the WP and the Research PIs, and that areas of known concern or emerging context were highlighted in Annex A and paragraph 8 of the paper.

6.2. Following discussion, the group decided that they were unable to address some of the questions posed to them in the paper at that time. On the basis that there were overarching, fundamental questions that applied across all indicators and required answers, the group felt that preliminary work should be undertaken prior to drilling into the detail of different sets of indicators through a rolling or other form of review process. Members highlighted a number of areas where an overarching understanding was required.

6.3. One of these related to the purposes that the performance indicators were intended to serve, with the group asking: Why are the PIs produced and who is their audience? What 'big picture' issues do they seek to address? Are they intended to fit with policy, public information, performance agendas, or a combination of these (and other) areas? Another related to why the current PIs consider the areas that they do. How did the set of PIs that were arrived at come about? In what ways do areas considered by other measures (such as those relating to HEBCIS or EMS) differ to those considered by the PIs?

6.4. The group felt that gaining clarity and an up to date perspective on these areas was essential to the future development of a meaningful review of the PIs. However, they felt neither the PISG nor the PITG were best placed to deliver the answers to these fundamental questions, and that external consultancy could be used to provide an unbiased and objective overview of the issues. On this understanding, the secretariat were asked to draft a tender document that would outline the project's aims: in a timely fashion it should seek to ask three or four questions that would help to address the overarching issues, outline the key stakeholders and engage with them in an appropriate and timely manner. PISG members were asked to consider the contribution that their organisation would be able to make to the costs of this exercise. Members representing the funding bodies were asked to liaise with their sponsor departments, not all of whom were represented at the meeting but who may be key to the sharing of costs.

Action: Secretariat to draft a tender document inviting external consultancy to address the overarching and fundamental issues highlighted by the PISG.

Action: PISG members to consider their organisation's budgetary capability in terms of contributing to the costs of this exercise.

6.5. The group discussed some aspects of a future review process in more detail. They noted some of the considerations relating to the UK comprising of four nations. While there was no UK-wide policy and UK homogeneity was ambitious, the PIs were not felt to necessarily be intended to address policy concerns in this manner. Each nation was noted to have their own indicators which related directly to their nation's policy priorities, while they also had an interest in what the other nations might be doing differently as well as in cross-border flows. The group felt that the review process would need to be sensitive to such considerations, and recognise that the real

value of the PIs was the ability to use their benchmarks to make consistent comparisons across a small number of indicators.

6.6. Members also noted some of the emerging context highlighted by the paper in respect to the WP indicators. In England particularly, these indicators were felt to be in more immediate need of review. The group agreed that a detailed review of this set of PIs should form the second stage of the review process and that this stage should be reached in as timely a manner as possible. This stage would follow consideration of the overarching issues discussed earlier, so in the meantime the PISG agreed to seek further advice from the PITG in relation to the issues related to these indicators.

Action: The PITG to provide advice to the PISG in relation to both the issues associated with the WP indicators, and the potential options related to these indicators for consideration in further development of the review process.

## **7. Performance Indicators contextual information and commentary (PISG 12/03)**

7.1. JW introduced the paper, and invited the group to note that the modifications described at paragraph five were those that the PITG were recommending to the PISG. The PISG endorsed the recommendations, noting that the ideas were good and may contribute to further development of the PIs. Members noted that the technical detail currently provided ensured transparency that should be maintained, and questioned whether an FAQ section should replace or complement the existing “guide to PIs”. The group requested that HESA incorporate as many of these modifications as resource allowed into the 2012 release of the PIs. It was requested that the remaining modifications be introduced in the 2013 publication.

Action: HESA to incorporate the modifications described in paragraph five within the publication of the PIs at the earliest opportunity, dependent on resource implications.

7.2. Paragraph seven of the paper was described as outlining suggestions made by the PITG for further consideration by the PISG. The second bullet point was noted to be duplicated across paragraphs five and seven, and did not need further consideration here. The suggestions were otherwise discussed in turn.

7.3. Members noted that the inclusion of a short survey on the HESA website as described at the first bullet point; a review of the presentation of the PI tables as described at the fifth bullet point; and a review of press relations and institutional engagement as described at the seventh bullet point may all overlap and interact with a review of the PIs. On this basis a short survey on the HESA website was felt to be of lower immediate priority, but should be implemented as an ongoing setup on the HESA website following the review of the PIs. The considerations of the fifth and seventh bullet points should be incorporated into any review process and into longer-term development.

7.4. The suggestions described at bullet points three and four were noted to relate to representation of the PIs and to require further consideration, in terms of resource requirements in particular. The group noted that information in different representations was already available to institutional users via HEIDI, and that better understanding of public information requirements in relation to these statistics was required. As such, these suggestions were felt to be of lower immediate priority but useful for longer term development.

7.5. Having considered the suggestion described at the sixth bullet point, the group agreed that the publication of the PIs should make note of issues relating to the WP indicators for

institutions in Scotland. It may be appropriate to explain the reasons why they are not included in all of the WP measures, and highlight the availability of other measures prepared by Scotland that focussed specifically on institutions in that nation. Beyond this, it was not desirable to take further action as described at the sixth bullet point on account of the risk to the value and interpretation of the PIs.

Action: PISG to revisit bullet points one, three to five and seven of paragraph seven in due course in relation to longer term development of the PIs following completion of the review process.

Action: HESA to include a note within the 2012 publication of the PIs outlining the known issues relating to the WP indicators for institutions in Scotland and highlighting the availability of measures prepared by Scotland.

## **8. Publication dates of the 2012 Performance Indicators (PISG 12/04)**

8.1. JW introduced the paper and noted that since its preparation, it had come to light that the proposed date of publication of tranche 2 of the PIs fell on a bank holiday in Northern Ireland. It was therefore proposed that tranche 2 instead be published a week earlier, on Thursday 5 July 2012.

8.2. The group agreed the proposed publication dates.

## **9. Papers proposed as exempt from immediate publication (those marked with [+] on the agenda)**

9.1. Members noted that though paper PISG 12/02 had been proposed as exempt from immediate publication on the basis that it related to policy in development, it was not controversial given the change in direction in this area resulting from the group's discussion earlier in this meeting. However, they noted that Annex A to this paper was a PITG paper and therefore at the discretion of the PITG as to whether or not they wished it to be exempt from immediate publication.

9.2. The group agreed that none of the papers should be exempt from immediate publication, with a caveat that the PITG would be asked to agree to the publication of Annex A of paper PISG 12/02.

Action: Secretariat to seek PITG agreement to the publication of Annex A of PISG 12/02 by correspondence.

Action: HESA to publish the agreed non-exempt papers from this January 2012 meeting on their website alongside associated content relating to governance of the PIs.

## **10. Date of next meeting**

10.1. The group agreed that they would prefer to meet again around the time of the publication of tranche 2 of the PIs in late June / July, with dates to be agreed by correspondence.

**Meeting closed 15.40pm**