

Initial analysis of the WP and research Performance Indicators

PITG 11/07

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 PISG¹. 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.

¹ 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 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.

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.

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.