

Performance Indicators Technical Group

Minutes of the Performance Indicators Technical Group held at 13.30pm on Friday, 29 June 2012 at Northavon House, Bristol

Present:

Members:	Jonathan Waller	Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) [Chair]
	Gordon Anderson	Scottish Funding Council (SFC)
	Matthew Bollington	Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (BIS)
	Suzie Dent	HESA
	Amira Irshad	Welsh Government (attending on behalf of Chris Williams)
	Hannah Falvey	Higher Education Funding Council for Wales (HEFCW)
	Jovan Luzajic	Universities UK, Universities Scotland, Higher Education Wales, Guild HE
	Allan Nesbitt	Department for Education and Learning, Northern Ireland (DELNI)
	Richard Puttock	HEFCE
	Daniel Walker	UCAS
Secretariat:	Alison Brunt	HEFCE
	Mark Gittoes	HEFCE
Observing:	Emily Thorn	HEFCE

1. Welcome from the chair

1.1. Following introductions, the chair welcomed members to the meeting.

2. Matters arising

2.1. Circumstances had required the group to accept the minutes of their previous meeting as being a true and accurate record by correspondence. The chair noted that this had worked well and that adopting this approach on a more permanent basis would allow alignment in terms of the timings of PISG meetings. Members agreed that the minutes of their meetings would be agreed by correspondence going forward.

2.2. The group were invited to note the final action of the minutes of their previous meeting recommending that "the 2012 publication note improvements observed in qualifications on entry data in 2010-11 for English institutions only as a result of incentives introduced by the new student numbers control policy in England", and that this action was yet to be completed. Members agreed that as circumstances had changed the action could be modified, to recommend that a more comprehensive statement be released outlining a range of changes that were likely to have an impact on PI benchmarks. Specifically, the statement could capture effects of England's student number control policy; changes to the composition of the UCAS tariff and the recording of BTEC and Access to HE qualifications on entry; as well as key areas of the PISG's and the PITG's work over the last year. Where members had more information in

respect of these aspects they were asked to provide it to the secretariat to enable greater clarity.

Action: The PITG to recommend to the PISG the publication of a more comprehensive statement on the HESA website.

Action: HESA and HEFCE to draft such a statement, with members providing further information to the secretariat to enable greater clarity.

3. Feedback from the January 2012 PISG

(PISG minutes)

3.1. JW invited members to note that the PISG's discussion of HE provision registered at FECs from their January 2012 meeting would be covered in more detail later in the meeting on account of it relating to an agenda item. The PISG had agreed to decouple this from HE provision registered at other alternative providers, which would be considered in due course when greater clarity became available in respect of the HE regulatory framework.

3.2. The PISG had discussed and accepted the technical group's recommendations in respect of benchmarks and A level subject information. Their discussion was noted to have been based on a paper heavily informed by the PITG's analysis, and the PISG extended their thanks and congratulations to the PITG for a thorough and sophisticated analysis. The PISG's decision in this area would be communicated in a statement published alongside the minutes of the January 2012 PISG meeting.

3.3. The group were advised of the PISG's decision to commission external consultancy to undertake a fundamental review of the PIs, ahead of embarking on a review process that would drill into the detail of the different sets of indicators. JW noted that the PITG had explored issues and emerging context relating to the widening participation indicators thoroughly already, but that the group retained a watching brief and would need to alert the PISG to any arising issues.

3.4. Members discussed an action outstanding from the January 2012 PISG meeting in which HESA had been instructed 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". It was noted that the Scottish measures were neither formal PIs nor Official Statistics so while they may provide useful contextual information, the presentation of any highlighting of availability would need to be carefully managed for the greater good of the PIs¹. HESA agreed that they would consider practical options in this respect, with the approach to be adopted to be agreed by the PITG by correspondence.

Action: HESA to consider practical options for optimising the presentation of a note outlining the known issues relating to the WP indicators for institutions in Scotland and highlighting the availability of measures prepared by Scotland, with the chosen approach to be agreed with the PITG by correspondence.

¹ Subsequent discussion following the meeting indicated that the SFC had been designated as an Official Statistics producer under the Official Statistics (Scotland) Amendment Order 2010, coming into force on 15 December 2010. It followed that there was uncertainty regarding publications of the Scottish measures after this date in relation to their designation as Official Statistics (certain other conditions would also need to be satisfied in order for the measures to be Official Statistics).

4. Technical challenges of incorporating HE provision registered at FECs within the Performance Indicators (PITG 12/01)

4.1. MG introduced the paper and noted that the PISG had agreed to decouple HE provision registered at FECs from HE provision registered at other alternative providers, which would be considered in due course when greater clarity became available in respect of the HE regulatory framework. On account of the PISG having already considered the incorporation of HE in FE within the PIs from a policy perspective, the PITG's discussion would focus on the practicalities and technicalities of such an incorporation.

4.2. HEFCE noted that pressure from FECs who were keen to benchmark against equivalent provision in HEIs meant that they would be publishing a set of indicators for HE provision registered at FECs in England before the end of Summer 2012. They expected the analysis to be well received by the English FE sector, who were said to have recognised the material differences between themselves and HEIs but to have found the binary divide between measures on the basis of type of institution unhelpful. HEFCE recognised that although they had overcome a number of the technical challenges relating to the incorporation of HE in FE within the low participation neighbourhoods (LPN) indicator (table series T1) and non-continuation indicators for full-time entrants (tables T3a and T3d), some issues remained:

- a. Table T5 would not be possible on account of HE in FE student numbers simply being too small to support that methodology;
- b. Franchising and accountability would need to be addressed in respect of reporting by teaching or registering institution, though the review of the PIs was expected to consider this in a broader context;
- c. Boundary definitions in respect of HEFCE- and SFA-funded HE provision in English FECs would need to be addressed, where SFA-funded HE is not prescribed HE.

4.3. HEFCE also noted that while HESA did not currently hold the English HE in FE data used to construct their indicators, they would be happy to assist HESA in obtaining and using that data. HESA confirmed that they would be interested in obtaining HE in FE data from all four administrations, and noted that this interest extended beyond just the PIs. The group felt that while this may provide some scope for UK wide development of HE in FE indicators in the longer term, there would be a number of challenges to be overcome first in terms of understanding the consistency, quality and availability of HE in FE data across the UK.

4.4. HEFCW noted that while incorporation of HE in FE within the PIs was desirable, issues relating to data quality were likely to prevent this being done robustly. On account of such provision in Wales being small there were few incentives for data collectors or providers to significantly improve data quality to this end.

4.5. DELNI informed the group that Northern Ireland had published retention information in relation to HE in FE in April. DELNI would require clarity on how an alternative indicator would be appropriate to provision in Northern Ireland, including understanding to what extent it would complement, improve or do detriment to their existing measure. It was believed that issues relating to data quality would prevent the development of robust WP indicators.

4.6. SFC noted that the nature of HE in FE provision differed in Scotland in comparison to the rest of the UK, and that they already produced an annual set of indicators relating to provision at the FE colleges in Scotland, which included HE in FE provision. These indicators were well established and SFC indicated that any new PIs produced in this area would need to add value to the existing SFC measures for FE colleges in Scotland.

4.7. UUK informed the group that they would be keen for UK-wide coverage (on the basis that any issues arising between countries of the UK were adequately addressed to the satisfaction of all parties) and for full comparability across HE provision in HEIs and FECs. An interest was expressed in understanding the effects of broadening out the sector in England, and potential impacts on benchmarks.

4.8. The group recognised that it would be challenging to produce HE in FE indicators on a UK wide basis that were consistent and considered appropriate across all four UK administrations. Members noted that the review of the PIs would therefore need to look at the comparability of HE in FE data and provision existing across the UK. Additionally, it was felt that some of this agenda may be overtaken by the fundamental review of the PIs. In particular, the fundamental review may take a view on the requirement or not for unified coverage of HE provision, in the context of considering the purposes of the PIs. It may also inform the development and agreement of a consistent set of indicators.

Action: The PITG to recommend to the PISG that the fundamental review of the PIs consider the desirability of incorporating HE registered at FECs within the PIs in the context of the purposes of the PIs. Additionally, that the review consider the comparability of HE in FE data and provision across the UK.

5. Introduction of POLAR3

(PITG 12/02)

5.1. MG introduced the paper and reminded the group that the POLAR2 methodology currently employed by the PIs made use of data relating to 2000 through to 2004. HEFCE were planning to publish an update to the methodology making use of data relating to 2005 through to 2009: POLAR3 could be expected to be released before the end of Summer 2012.

5.2. The group agreed that there were no reasons not to make use of the more up-to-date POLAR3 data within the WP PIs as soon as possible. In particular, institutions' potential use of the LPN indicator in their OFFA access agreements was noted, and members felt that if there was any possibility that institutions might be doing some sort of targeting on the basis of the indicator then the continued use of POLAR2 was indefensible².

Action: The PITG to recommend to the PISG that HESA implement use of POLAR3 data in the LPN indicator in the 2013 publication of the PIs.

5.3. It was agreed that additional information would need to be published alongside the PIs in 2013 to aid understanding of the change from the POLAR2 methodology to POLAR3, and its effects. HEFCE noted that look-up files providing the classifications would be available via its

² Subsequent discussion following the meeting highlighted the inclusion of POLAR data within one of the non-continuation indicators, to which this decision also extends. Table T3b (Non-continuation following year of entry: young full-time first degree entrants by low participation marker and continuation status) would also make use of POLAR3 data in the 2013 publication of the PIs.

website for both POLAR2 and POLAR3, and that this should assist institutions in understanding the detail of the change.

5.4. Members noted that in the change in 2006-07 from the use of SuperProfiles to the use of the POLAR methodology, both measures were given for one overlapping year. However, given the usage of the LPN indicator in OFFA access agreements, institutions and others would require a greater overlap to enable reasonable comparisons across a longer time series. The group agreed that the 2013 publication of the PIs should:

- a. Provide the LPN indicator for the current cohort (entrants in 2011-12) on the basis of the POLAR3 methodology;
- b. Include supplementary, institution level tables that provide the LPN indicator for the previous two cohorts (entrants in 2010-11 and 2009-10) on the basis of the POLAR3 methodology;
- c. Provide a supplementary, institution level table showing the LPN indicator for the current cohort on the basis of the POLAR2 methodology;
- d. Include appropriate explanations of the data available and its interpretation.

5.5. It was felt that the c. above should also be provided in the two successive publications of the PIs following 2013 (up to entrants in 2013-14) so that a five-year overlapping time series would eventually be available to users. The group agreed that all tables published, supplementary and otherwise, should include benchmarks re-based to the POLAR methodology being employed by the indicator contained within that table.

Action: The PITG to recommend to the PISG that HESA publish the supplementary tables and additional information described at b. to d. above in the 2013 publication of the PIs, and that c. also be provided in the two successive publications.

6. Advising on the review of the Performance Indicators (PITG 12/03)

6.1. Having recognised the value of the PIs at their July 2011 meeting, the PISG at that time noted that in the context of recent changes to the HE sector it was important that the PIs continued to be meaningful measures. In subsequent meetings the PISG and the PITG have discussed the need for a process for reviewing the different sets of PIs to be established.

6.2. Thanking the PITG for their analysis of issues and emerging context in relation to the WP and research indicators, the PISG at their previous meeting recognised that there were unanswered overarching questions that applied across all indicators and should be addressed prior to drilling into the detail of the different sets of indicators. MG advised the group of the PISG's decision to commission external consultancy to undertake a preliminary, fundamental review of the PIs.

6.3. The PISG had felt that the first review process should ask fundamental questions about how meaningful the indicators were to different users; consider changes, or potential changes, to the wider context and the data underlying the PIs; and seek to develop the indicators in alignment with the characteristics of Official Statistics. The PITG had been invited to contribute any other areas that this first review should cover or bear in mind, and extended this list to include:

- a. Consideration of differences and policy priorities in the four UK administrations;

- b. Enhanced understanding of who the PIs' audience are and how they engage with the indicators, to include how the PIs are used by that audience and any influence the PIs may have over those users' behaviour;
- c. Understanding of what the issues are that the PIs particularly seek to address;
- d. Consideration of whether the PIs remain fit for purpose.

Action: Secretariat to draft a tender document inviting external consultancy to address the fundamental review of the PIs for the October PISG meeting, and share with the PITG in due course.

6.4. The group noted that it would be essential for the review to approach the PISG member bodies to feed in their thoughts and perspectives. Additionally, PITG members were asked to retain a watching brief in relation to issues and emerging context regarding the PIs.

Action: The PITG to alert the PISG as appropriate to any issues arising or emerging context in relation to the PIs.

7. Update on changes to the contextual information and commentary (PITG 12/04)

7.1. SD reminded the group that modifications made to the contextual information and commentary had arisen as a result of a perceived need to address the visibility, awareness and understanding of the PIs. In particular, the PISG had asked that the PITG focus on providing accessible information regarding the use and content of the PIs. At their previous meeting in November 2011 the PITG had agreed to recommend to the PISG a series of modifications to the contextual information and commentary.

7.2. It was reported that the PISG had considered and agreed the proposed modifications, highlighting those of more immediate priority and those that may be incorporated into a review of the PIs and longer-term development. HESA reported that a number of the higher priority modifications had been fully implemented, others remained a work in progress, and that those for longer-term development would be borne in mind throughout a review process.

8. Suppression limits for the Performance Indicators (Oral)

8.1. The PITG discussed issues relating to suppression limits for the PIs and associated responsibilities with regards to data protection. It was noted that the current approach to disclosure control rounded populations to the nearest five and calculated percentages on the basis of the unrounded populations, where that percentage was suppressed if the denominator used in its calculation was less than 20. Members also recognised the potential for percentages based on small numbers to be misleading, and felt that this was sufficiently addressed through the provision of benchmarks and significance indicators, as well as suppression on the basis of the denominator.

8.2. The group acknowledged that the current suppression limits requiring the denominator to be not less than 20 differed from other standards such as HESA and Unistats. It was agreed that too much transparency and information would be lost if the PIs suppressed on the basis of the denominator being less than 52, as HESA did in their standard publications. Members agreed to recommend that the 2013 publication of the PIs align with Unistats and suppress on the basis of the denominator being less than 22.5.

Action: The PITG to recommend to the PISG that HESA implement the use of a suppression limit of 22.5 for the denominators used to calculate percentages in the 2013 publication of the PIs.

8.3. Whether or not the PIs' current approach to disclosure control sufficiently prevented the ability to reverse engineer percentages, and identification of the size of the underlying populations, was discussed. Members noted that for data protection to be considered compromised it was required to both be able to identify an individual and to determine something about that individual that would otherwise be unknown. It was felt that to identify an individual within the PIs, the current disclosure controls would require you to already know something about that individual. The risks of compromising data protection were therefore believed to be minimal, even if in rare instances it were possible to reverse engineer percentages on account of there being no suppression on the basis of the numerator.

8.4. The group agreed that the secretariat should prepare a paper to be shared with the PITG by correspondence that made a fuller assessment of the risks of the PIs compromising data protection table by table, and considered any standards and best practice employed by other statistics producers. HESA noted that their publications made use of variable levels of precision in respect to the number of decimal places used in reporting columns of percentages, attempting to prevent reverse engineering. Members agreed that any best practice would need to be considered on balance: there was a risk of undermining the public value of the information provided by the PIs through the loss of too much information in the statistics.

Action: Secretariat to prepare a paper to be shared with the PITG by correspondence making a fuller assessment of risks of the PIs compromising data protection, as well as the effects of implementing a suppression limit of 22.5 in the 2013 publication of the PIs.

9. Technical changes to the Performance Indicators

(PITG 12/05)

9.1. SD introduced the paper and noted that the changes it discussed (to the UCAS tariff and to the DLHE questionnaire) would have an impact for the 2013 publication of the PIs. Data was not yet available to help determine the scale and nature of that impact.

9.2. Modifications to the 2011-12 DLHE questionnaire had resulted in a need for HESA to redefine the concept of 'activity' (in respect of employment or study outcomes) for use in their publications. The group were invited to note that the changes would also impact on the employment PIs, and considered a mapping between the old and new categorisations of 'activity' that HESA had developed following consultation with a review group consisting of statutory customers and experts.

9.3. Members agreed that there was no way to replicate the previous categorisations so a new approach was unavoidable, and that it was sensible to align the definition used within the PIs with that used in HESA standard publications. HESA anticipated little difference in the content of the categorisations, although the extent of this would not be known until the collection had taken place. The proposal that HESA's mapping be used to create the employment PIs was agreed by the group.

Action: The PITG to recommend to the PISG that HESA implement the use of their proposed activity categorisations in the 2013 publication of the employment PIs.

9.4. Changes to the qualifications included in the UCAS tariff were reported and the group were invited to note the list of qualifications would be newly included. Members agreed that it was sensible to make use of the standard tariff calculation (XTARIFF) where possible, and recognised that there would be some impact on the PI benchmarks as a result of incorporating the new inclusions. The extent of the impact would not be known until the data became available.

Action: The PITG to recommend to the PISG that HESA continue the use of XTARIFF and incorporate the new qualifications included in the UCAS tariff.

9.5. Subsequent to this meeting of the PITG, it has been identified that Essential Skills NI and Wales (all levels) are at an equivalent level to key skills and core skills, which have already been excluded from the standard tariff calculation (XTARIFF). For consistency, HESA have excluded the Essential Skills qualifications from the derivation of XTARIFF and, in a change to the list provided in paper PITG 12/05, qualifications with codes E1 to E4 and W1 to W4 will not be included.

10. Papers proposed as exempt from immediate publication

10.1. The group agreed that none of the papers should be exempt from immediate publication.

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

11. Date of the next meeting

11.1. The PITG would meet next in January 2013, with dates to be agreed by correspondence.

12. Any other business

12.1. Members noted a recent HEFCE publication of rates of qualification from postgraduate research degrees (<http://www.hefce.ac.uk/pubs/year/2012/201210/>). The publication gave the projected study outcomes of full-time students starting postgraduate research degrees in 2008-09 and 2009-10 by institution, and the group speculated as to the potential to incorporate these or similar measures into the Performance Indicators. Recognising the role of the review of the PIs, members requested that a paper be brought to the next meeting providing more information on the definitions and coverage used.

Action: Secretariat to prepare a paper for the PITG's next meeting providing further detail on the recent HEFCE publication of rates of qualification from postgraduate research degrees.

12.2. In light of OFFA's recent expansion of their analytical capabilities, the group considered the principles relating to organisations' representation on the PITG. They agreed to recommend to the steering group that a principle be adopted whereby, if an organisation was represented on the PISG (as per that group's terms of reference), and had or gained technical expertise within that organisation then they should be invited to join the technical group. Members noted that this was likely to lead to OFFA and the NUS receiving an invitation for a technical representative to join the PITG.

Action: The PITG to recommend to the PISG that the principles relating to an organisation's representation on the PITG be revisited, and that OFFA and the NUS receive an invitation for a technical representative to join the PITG.

Meeting closed at 15.30 pm

Actions arising:

Paragraph 2.2: The PITG to recommend to the PISG the publication of a more comprehensive statement on the HESA website.

Paragraph 2.2: HESA and HEFCE to draft such a statement, with members providing further information to the secretariat to enable greater clarity.

Paragraph 3.4: HESA to consider practical options for optimising the presentation of a note outlining the known issues relating to the WP indicators for institutions in Scotland and highlighting the availability of measures prepared by Scotland, with the chosen approach to be agreed with the PITG by correspondence.

Paragraph 4.8: The PITG to recommend to the PISG that the fundamental review of the PIs consider the desirability of incorporating HE registered at FECs within the PIs in the context of the purposes of the PIs. Additionally, that the review consider the comparability of HE in FE data and provision across the UK.

Paragraph 5.2: The PITG to recommend to the PISG that HESA implement use of POLAR3 data in the LPN indicator in the 2013 publication of the PIs.

Paragraph 5.5: The PITG to recommend to the PISG that HESA publish the supplementary tables and additional information described at b. to d. above in the 2013 publication of the PIs, and that c. also be provided in the two successive publications.

Paragraph 6.3: Secretariat to draft a tender document inviting external consultancy to address the fundamental review of the PIs for the October PISG meeting, and share with the PITG in due course.

Paragraph 6.4: The PITG to alert the PISG as appropriate to any issues arising or emerging context in relation to the PIs.

Paragraph 8.2: The PITG to recommend to the PISG that HESA implement the use of a suppression limit of 22.5 for the denominators used to calculate percentages in the 2013 publication of the PIs.

Paragraph 8.4: Secretariat to prepare a paper to be shared with the PITG by correspondence making a fuller assessment of risks of the PIs compromising data protection, as well as effects of implementing a suppression limit of 22.5 in the 2013 publication of the PIs.

Paragraph 9.3: The PITG to recommend to the PISG that HESA implement the use of their proposed activity categorisations in the 2013 publication of the employment PIs.

Paragraph 9.4: The PITG to recommend to the PISG that HESA continue the use of XTARIFF and incorporate the new qualifications included in the UCAS tariff.

Paragraph 10.1: HESA to publish the agreed non-exempt papers from this June 2012 meeting on their website alongside associated content relating to governance of the PIs.

Paragraph 12.1: Secretariat to prepare a paper for the PITG's next meeting providing further detail on the recent HEFCE publication of rates of qualification from postgraduate research degrees.

Paragraph 12.2: The PITG to recommend to the PISG that the principles relating to an organisation's representation on the PITG be revisited, and that OFFA and the NUS receive an invitation for a technical representative to join the PITG.