

UK Performance Indicators Steering Group

Minutes of the UK Performance Indicators Steering Group held at 13.00 on Friday, 21 February 2014 at Finlaison House, London

Present:

Members:	Heather Fry	Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) [Chair]
	Alison Allden	Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA)
	Jane Johns	Higher Education Funding Council for Wales (HEFCW, attending on behalf of Celia Hunt)
	Dr Kevin Mundy	Higher Education Wales
	Martin Smith	Scottish Funding Council (SFC)
	Jonathan Waller	HESA
Secretariat:	Alison Brunt	HEFCE
	Mark Gittoes	HEFCE
Observing:	Janet Beer	Chair of the Higher Education Public Information Steering Group (HEPISG)

Apologies:

David Barrett	OFFA
Mark Corver	UCAS
Colette Eley	Welsh Government
Celia Hunt	HEFCW
Bryan MacGregor	Universities Scotland
Neil MacLennan	Scottish Government
Debbie McVitty	NUS
Professor Geoffrey Petts	Universities UK
Paul Rasch	Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (BIS)
Awaiting nomination	Department for Education and Learning, Northern Ireland (DEL)

1. Welcome from the chair

1.1. Following introductions, the chair welcomed members to the meeting and gave apologies received from those members unable to attend.

2. Minutes of September 2013 meeting of the UK Performance Indicators Steering Group and matters arising (Oral and UKPISG minutes from September 2013)

2.1. Members were invited to note that the minutes of the previous meeting had been agreed by the group by correspondence during November 2013. They had been published on the HESA website alongside associated content relating to governance of the UKPIs in December 2013 to contextualise the publication of "How should we measure higher education? A fundamental review of the Performance Indicators".

2.2. The group noted the actions detailed at paragraphs 4.7 and 4.10 of the September 2013 minutes. In particular, JW updated members as to the Official Statistics requirements relating to the discontinuation of any of the current indicators. These were said to be: adequate engagement with users of the statistics and sourcing of stakeholder views of the measures; and a one-year notice period whereby the discontinuation was announced in the publication cycle preceding the removal of the measure, at the latest.

2.3. It was acknowledged that the September 2013 minutes had invited the UKPISG to further discuss a review of the retention UKPIs at their next meeting. Members agreed that it would be appropriate to delay this discussion until a later meeting when reviews of other indicators were further advanced. However, it was acknowledged that retention was of increasing interest to policy makers, becoming especially prominent in England. Members agreed that they should keep a watching brief on changing priorities and pressures with regards to student retention, and not delay discussion of a review of these UKPIs for too long.

ACTION: UKPISG to maintain a watching brief on changing priorities with regards to student retention and the associated UKPIs.

3. Update from the UK Performance Indicators Technical Group (Oral and UKPITG minutes from November 2013)

3.1. JW informed the group that the substantive item discussed by the UKPITG in November 2013 was the review of the widening participation UKPIs. It was reported that the technical group had lengthy discussions regarding their role in the in-depth review process and had identified two particular concerns. One of UKPITG's concerns focussed on the policy directive they required in order to develop a review process that would suitably address the expectations and requirements of the sector and other stakeholders in UKPIs. This was felt to be especially important given the high profile of the WP indicators. The second concern regarded the level, depth and breadth of specialist knowledge required to take forward an in-depth review

3.2. Further UKPITG discussions had considered the fit of the existing WP indicators with the principles proposed for UKPIs. The results of this exercise were included within paper UKPISG 14/01, JW noted that the UKPITG had found this to be a straightforward and useful process. The group had also embarked on a discussion of the potential new

areas for WP UKPIs proposed to them by the UKPISG, but found themselves limited by the concerns outlined in paragraph 3.1. The meeting decided to pick up these points in relation to item 4 of the agenda.

3.3. JW informed the group that the UKPITG had considered the 2014 publication dates for the UKPIs proposed by HESA. The technical group had considered any potential issues or conflicts regarding those dates and had not identified any concerns. The publication dates required the formal approval of the UKPISG before HESA could announce them in the coming weeks. The UKPISG gave formal approval of the 2014 UK PI publication dates proposed by HESA.

ACTION: HESA to publish the UKPIs according to the publication schedule proposed.

4. Review of the Widening Participation UK Performance Indicators (UKPISG 14/01†)

4.1. MG introduced the paper and mentioned that some of the concerns highlighted by JW and the technical group were also noted in the paper. The group were invited to note that the in-depth review process was seen as a sizeable responsibility and that there could be value in reducing the task to more manageable undertakings. It was acknowledged that the processes agreed upon with respect to the review of the WP UKPIs could set a precedent and act as somewhat of a model for future reviews of the other sets of UKPIs. As such, it was important that the review processes were appropriate to the profile of the measures.

4.2. The UKPISG agreed the following approach:

4.2.1 Assessment of fit with principles: Members were reminded of the value that the UKPITG had seen in considering the fit of the set of existing WP UKPIs with the principles proposed for UKPIs: this was felt to be a good starting point which could help guide the UKPISG to some initial policy steers for a given set of UKPIs. It would also provide a foundation for the subsequent review processes.

4.2.2 Roundtable discussions: The group welcomed a proposal to establish a series of expert groups or roundtables to provide access to the level, depth and breadth of specialist knowledge that the UKPITG felt was required to advance any in-depth review process. In his role as chair of the UKPITG, JW indicated the technical group's support for the proposal.

It was felt that roundtable discussions which brought together representatives of appropriate organisations (including academic research experts), groups, committees or departments with members of the UKPITG and/or the UKPISG would help understanding of the latest issues and interests with regards to a specific area covered by UKPIs. It was noted that WP roundtable attendees would need to span the compulsory and tertiary education areas, as well as those with expertise with regards to more general measures of deprivation.

Those roundtable discussions could usefully consider both inputs (data collections) and outputs (users and interpretations) related to the given UKPI area under consideration, including considerations specific to different UK nations. The

UKPISG agreed that the principles proposed for UKPIs should be used to provide a focus and structure for roundtable discussions.

Members acknowledged that an expert group had the potential to overcomplicate a situation on account of their interests being likely to be wide ranging and divergent. It was agreed that roundtable discussions should report back to the UKPISG; who would have an awareness of priorities and aspirations; could use this to moderate the feedback received; and subsequently could make use of those discussions in providing an appropriate policy steer to the UKPISG as to the following review processes and direction.

ACTION: The UKPITG to consider appropriate representatives of organisations, groups, committees or departments to join a roundtable discussion of future WP UKPIs.

4.2.3 Development of existing UKPIs: The UKPISG acknowledged that the longevity of the UKPIs had been identified as one of their key strengths. As such it was agreed that there would be value in developing and improving existing measures if it was possible that, with further work, they could meet both the principles and policy objectives for UKPIs. If feedback from roundtable discussions indicated potential for the development of any existing WP UKPIs, the UKPISG could provide appropriate direction to enable the UKPITG to begin such work.

4.2.4 Development of new UKPIs: Members agreed that where feedback from roundtable discussions highlighted a need for the development of a new UKPI the UKPISG would carefully consider the guidance and policy steer that they needed to provide to the UKPITG to begin such work. It was acknowledged that such direction could need to be quite specific in some cases.

4.3. Recognising that there was some pressure for timely progress to be made with an in-depth review of the WP UKPIs, and that their discussions could help provide additional focus for a roundtable discussion of these measures, the UKPISG proceeded to consider analysis of the current indicators' fit with the principles proposed for UKPIs. Members clarified interpretation of the proposed principles in three areas:

4.3.1 With regards to principle A1 that "*UKPIs should normally seek to reflect the totality of higher education (HE) provision and institutions across the UK*", it was agreed that "totality" was not intended to apply to an individual UKPI but rather to the UKPI area as a set of measures. For example, it would not be appropriate for the state school indicator to be applied to non-UK cohorts, but WP measures that were applicable to non-UK cohorts could be considered to enable the coverage of that population within a set of WP UKPIs.

4.3.2 Also with regards to principle A1, the group agreed that consideration needed to be given to the effort required to increase coverage of the UKPIs relative to the information gained from such an increase. For example, HE provision delivered in FECs was considered to be a substantial omission for England and Scotland whereby addressing the imbalance and providing more complete information would be of great value. However, HE in FE provision in Wales and Northern Ireland was almost negligible and minimal information would be gained through its incorporation within the UKPIs.

4.3.3 With regards to principle E1 that “*Where possible, existing data sources should be used to develop new UKPIs and/or to improve existing UKPIs...*” the UKPISG noted that none of the data items used in the UKPIs were collected solely for the purposes of producing the UKPIs but were of wider use and interest to users of HESA student data. As such there were limitations as to the UKPISG’s ability to reduce the burden of data collection even if a data item should no longer be used in the UKPIs.

4.4. The UKPISG considered the first question posed to them in paper UKPISG 14/01, which asked members to consider four types of disadvantage proposed by the secretariat. As a result it was agreed that there was a policy requirement to measure each of financial, educational and socio-economic disadvantage, and that the WP roundtable discussions should focus on these areas explicitly. It was agreed that if a range of WP UKPIs could be developed to suitably address the three areas above then it was likely that there would be no requirement for a single measure of multiple deprivations (a composite measure of disadvantage), which was likely to be too difficult to both develop, explain and understand.

ACTION: WP roundtable discussions to consider priorities and possibilities with regards to measures of each of financial, educational and socio-economic disadvantage.

ACTION: WP roundtable discussions to consider whether a single measure of multiple deprivations would add any value to a basket of WP measures spanning financial, educational and socio-economic disadvantage.

4.5. The UKPISG considered their assessment of the current WP UKPIs alongside the second question posed to them in paper UKPISG 14/01, which asked about the potential for one or more of the existing WP UKPIs to satisfy policy requirements for WP indicators:

4.5.1 The UKPIs considering the state school marker and receipt of disabled student's allowance (DSA) were felt to be the two existing indicators with the greatest scope for improvement and expansion such that they could become viable WP UKPIs for the longer term. The group noted that the problems associated with these indicators and their fit with the principles for UKPIs were not fundamental, and agreed that there continued to be a policy requirement for measures in these areas. However, members agreed that it was unclear whether the DSA indicators truly belonged among a set of WP indicators.

While the UKPISG acknowledged that there was a relationship between receipt of DSA and educational disadvantage, they noted that there were similar relationships between educational disadvantage and other protected characteristics such as age or gender. Alongside other protected characteristics, receipt of DSA could be viewed as an issue relating to equality and diversity, rather than WP, which then served the UKPISG to question whether a set of diversity UKPIs might be required in the longer term. If they were, further questions were likely to arise as to whether UKPIs should seek to measure diversity in its own right, or to capture an intersection of diversity with socio-economic factors. It was

agreed that feedback from roundtable discussions in this area would be valuable in shaping further thinking.

ACTION: WP roundtable discussions to consider the placement of the DSA indicators and the nature of any requirement for diversity UKPIs.

4.5.2 The UKPISG acknowledged that many of the issues associated with the NS-SEC indicators were no more fundamental than those associated with the state school and DSA indicators. However, the problems highlighted in relation to the quality of the data underlying these measures were considered by the UKPISG to be fundamental and this was felt to be the overriding issue. If roundtable discussions indicated that this measure was no longer viable as a UKPI, the UKPISG agreed that this would be a position that they would support.

ACTION: WP roundtable discussions to consider the viability of the NS-SEC indicators given fundamental concerns regarding the quality of underlying data.

4.5.3 The UKPISG recognised the strengths of the POLAR methodology and its value in measuring educational disadvantage. However, members agreed that the type of disadvantage measured by POLAR3 was not present in Scotland and as such, the indicators based on this methodology could not facilitate an accurate comparison of educational disadvantage across the whole of the UK. On this basis there was support from members for a proposal that indicators based on POLAR3 be taken forward as part of the small set of nation-specific indicators that would seek to address differing national contexts.

ACTION: WP roundtable discussions to consider the potential for POLAR3 measures to be published as nation-specific indicators for each of England, Wales and Northern Ireland.

4.6. On the basis of their discussions and some of the actions arising for the attention of a roundtable discussion, the UKPISG agreed that if this area was to progress then the roundtable discussion needed to take place before the next meeting of the UKPISG.

5. Update from the HE Public Information Steering Group (Oral item)

5.1. Earlier than scheduled in the agenda on account of diary commitments, JB updated the group on the current work of the Higher Education Public Information Steering Group (HEPISG) and the review of the National Student Survey (NSS) in particular. It was noted that the intention of the NSS review was to modernise the survey to ensure that it remained fit for purpose across the next decade, and that it fitted within a wider review of the information landscape. That review was noted to extend across NSS, Unistats and the Key Information Set (KIS) and there were said to be some notable overlaps with the interests of the UKPISG: particularly with regards to measures of student retention and graduate employment.

5.2. It was also acknowledged that there was a developing policy interest in information relating to the quality of teaching and learning. The KIS and other similar platforms provided information in this area that was of relevance and interest to students, but the group noted that information more appropriate to the sector and to policy makers was less accessible. It was noted that, as a result, there could be increasing attention on

the UKPIs as a potential means to communicating that information to audiences other than students.

6. Responses to the “Invitation to comment” (UKPISG 14/02 †)

6.1. MG introduced the paper and reminded members of the reasons for issuing the “invitation to comment” following the fundamental review of the UKPIs. The group were invited to note that, as requested, comments had been received in relation to the principles proposed for UKPIs and the future of the research UKPIs.

6.2. The UKPISG considered comments made by respondents in relation to the principles proposed for UKPIs. It was noted that there was support for the proposed principles from all respondents, and that respondents had used the opportunity to highlight particular trust and respect for HESA as the organisation responsible for both collecting the underlying data and producing the UKPIs. UKPISG members addressed the specific respondent comments highlighted in paragraphs 18 and 19 of paper UKPISG 14/02:

6.2.1 Interaction between principles A4, C1 and D3: The UKPISG noted that these concerns were not limited to UKPIs and applied to any institution-level statistics. As long as publications of UKPIs continued to provide appropriate guidance as to the uses and interpretations of the UKPIs then little could be done to further prevent external bodies using the data for ranking purposes.

6.2.2 Principle C2 – suggested addition of “and in exceptional situations (where data is demonstrably incorrect) to temporarily suspend the listing of a UKPI for an institution”: Members noted that this was a matter of judgement that applied to the implementation of the principle rather than the principle itself. It was also felt that inclusion of this statement within the principle could weaken the case for the robustness of the UKPIs.

6.2.3 Principle D2 – a suggestion that “there should be an expectation that institutions will take note of their indicators and benchmarks” and respect of institutional autonomy. The UKPISG noted that this was interesting and applicable but did not require addressing in the principle itself.

6.2.4 Principle E1 – removal of “where possible”: Members agreed that the proposed removal was not possible without undermining the rest of the wording of the principle and that this was not a commitment that the group could make.

6.3. Having agreed on the basis of the feedback received from the “invitation to comment” that no changes would be made to the principles proposed for UKPIs, the set of principles were formally accepted by the UKPISG.

6.4. Members then discussed the future of the research UKPIs. They were informed that, although not received in time to be incorporated within the paper, a response had now been received from Research Councils UK. The secretariat reported that that response indicated their broad support for clearly defined indicators relating to research as long as they were accompanied by explanatory text detailing where and when they might be appropriate and, importantly, where not. The RCUK response also made reference to work that Research Councils were undertaking to identify robust indicators

relating to research and on which further details would become available in the coming months.

6.5. Taking account of the responses received, the group made a series of decisions regarding the future of the research UKPIs.

6.5.1 Members agreed that there was a need for UKPIs in the research area

6.5.2 The UKPISG also agreed that there was a requirement for new research UKPIs to be developed, regardless of whether or not the current set was discontinued. They agreed that there was scope to explore some of the suggestions raised in response to the “invitation to comment” as well as to work with the Research Councils to explore new measures that would be of use and of interest across a range of stakeholders.

ACTION: The UKPISG to seek advice from RCUK regarding the range of measures currently available and used in the research areas, as well as work ongoing in the sector to develop new measures.

ACTION: Research roundtable discussions to consider the measures suggested by respondents to the “invitation to comment” with regards to the research area. To include an assessment of their fit with the principles for UKPIs.

6.5.3 The UKPISG considered the value of asking the UKPITG to prepare an analysis of the fit of the current research UKPIs with the principles for UKPIs but agreed that this was unnecessary when the “invitation to comment” and the previous fundamental review processes provided plentiful evidence that the measures were not used. The ‘removal’ responses to the “invitation to comment” were recognised as being the most frequent responses. As a result, members agreed that the current set of research UKPIs should be discontinued.

6.5.4 Members next considered the timing of the discontinuation of the current set of research UKPIs. While at odds with the view of HEFCE’s research policy team, members noted that ‘immediate removal’ was the most frequent response to the “invitation to comment”. Members also noted that, in accordance with Official Statistics requirements, the discontinuation needed to be announced in July 2014 to take effect by the July 2015 publication of tranche 2 of the UKPIs. It was further noted that, with the publication of REF results, 2015 was a ‘convenient’ year for any gap in research UKPIs to fall given the other measures available to users interested in the research area. JW confirmed that it was likely that the announcement of the discontinuation of the current measures did not need to detail the specifics of their replacement in order to satisfy Official Statistics requirements. A gap in the publication of research UKPIs was therefore felt to be tolerable and members agreed that the current set of research UKPIs should be discontinued at the earliest opportunity. The group emphasised that particular care was needed with the wording of the announcement to ensure compliance with Official Statistics requirements and users expectations. While no firm commitment could be made as to the timing of replacement measures, members agreed that their development should seek introduction at the earliest opportunity.

ACTION: HESA to announce the discontinuation of the current research UKPIs in the July 2014 publication of tranche 2 of the UKPIs on 3 July 2014.

6.6. Members agreed that the decisions taken by the UKPISG and detailed in the paragraphs above needed to be communicated carefully to the sector and other stakeholders. A publication of the main lines of response and argument to the “invitation to comment”, and of the outcomes which followed, would help to communicate the group’s intentions and priorities with regards to research UKPIs. It would also help to build both awareness and an evidence base as to the processes employed by the UKPISG to take the decisions outlined in paragraph 6.5 above.

7. Communications plan and clarification of next steps (Oral item)

7.1. In their discussions noted at paragraph 6.6 the UKPISG committed to the publication of outcomes which followed the “invitation to comment”. The publication would communicate the formal acceptance of the principles for UKPIs; that work was continuing on an in-depth review of the WP UKPIs; and the discontinuation of the current research UKPIs. It was agreed that paper UKPISG 14/02 should be developed to include an account of the decisions taken by the UKPISG and then subsequently published by the four UK funding councils.

ACTION: Secretariat to draft a document to communicate the outcomes arising from the “invitation to comment”, and circulate to UKPISG for agreement by correspondence prior to its publication in conjunction with the second tranche of the UKPIs in July 2014.

8. Papers proposed as exempt from immediate publication (those marked with † on the agenda)

8.1. On the basis that paper UKPISG 14/01 related to the ongoing development of WP review processes it was agreed that this paper should be exempt from immediate publication on the HESA website. Members noted that shared content across paper UKPISG 14/01 and the minutes of the November 2013 meeting of the UKPITG led them to ask the UKPITG to redact sections of their minutes which related to discussion of the review of the WP UKPIs.

ACTION: UKPITG to redact sections of their November 2013 minutes which related to discussion of the review of the WP UKPIs.

8.2. On the basis that paper UKPISG 14/02 would be published in a different form in the coming months, members agreed that this paper should also be exempt from immediate publication on the HESA website.

9. Date of next meeting

9.1. The group agreed that they would prefer to meet again following a WP roundtable discussion; in October / November 2014, with dates to be agreed by correspondence.

9.2. Given the nature of the business discussed at this meeting, members were invited to note that there could be some business to be agreed by correspondence ahead of the next meeting: for example, nominations or decisions relating to the WP roundtable to be established.

ACTION: UKPISG secretariat to canvass dates for the next meeting by correspondence.

10. Any other business

10.1. The UKPISG noted that they had touched upon issues relating to an extension of the coverage of UKPIs to HE delivered in FECs in their discussion under section 4 of these minutes. The UKPITG were asked to consider the incorporation of FECs within future UKPIs, with a particular focus on data and collection issues related to such incorporation.

ACTION: The UKPITG to reconsider the incorporation of FECs within future UKPIs from a technical perspective.

10.2. An extension of UKPIs to cover HE delivered by alternative providers would also need to be considered in due course. UKPISG members representing the four UK funding bodies were asked to explore the numbers and significance of alternative providers in their nation. It was assumed that the issue would currently be mainly one for England, but that there was value for the devolved nations to ‘future-proof’ and understand the volume of such provision as well as the extent to which it would be included in other streams of reporting and accountability. Discussion with funding body colleagues and Government sponsor departments in order to set out the current and expected positions was considered a useful exercise.

ACTION: UKPISG representatives of the four UK funding bodies to explore the numbers and significance of alternative providers in their nation with appropriate colleagues and Government departments.

Meeting closed 15.10

Actions arising:

Paragraph 2.3: UKPISG to maintain a watching brief on changing priorities with regards to student retention and the associated UKPIs.

Paragraph 3.3: HESA to publish the UKPIs according to the publication schedule proposed.

Paragraph 4.2.2: The UKPITG to consider appropriate representatives of organisations, groups, committees or departments to join a roundtable discussion of future WP UKPIs.

Paragraph 4.4: WP roundtable discussions to consider priorities and possibilities with regards to measures of each of financial, educational and socio-economic disadvantage.

Paragraph 4.4: WP roundtable discussions to consider whether a single measure of multiple deprivations would add any value to a basket of WP measures spanning financial, educational and socio-economic disadvantage.

Paragraph 4.5.1: WP roundtable discussions to consider the placement of the DSA indicators and the nature of any requirement for diversity UKPIs.

Paragraph 4.5.2: WP roundtable discussions to consider the viability of the NS-SEC indicators given fundamental concerns regarding the quality of underlying data.

Paragraph 4.5.3: WP roundtable discussions to consider the potential for POLAR3 measures to be published as nation-specific indicators for each of England, Wales and Northern Ireland.

Paragraph 6.5.2: The UKPISG to seek advice from RCUK regarding the range of measures currently available and used in the research areas, as well as work ongoing in the sector to develop new measures.

Paragraph 6.5.2: Research roundtable discussions to consider the measures suggested by respondents to the “invitation to comment” with regards to the research area. To include an assessment of their fit with the principles for UKPIs.

Paragraph 6.5.4: HESA to announce the discontinuation of the current research UKPIs in the July 2014 publication of tranche 2 of the UKPIs on 3 July 2014.

Paragraph 7.1: Secretariat to draft a document to communicate the outcomes arising from the “invitation to comment”, and circulate to UKPISG for agreement by correspondence prior to its publication in conjunction with the second tranche of the UKPIs in July 2014.

Paragraph 8.1: UKPITG to redact sections of their November 2013 minutes which related to discussion of the review of the WP UKPIs.

Paragraph 9.2: UKPISG secretariat to canvass dates for the next meeting by correspondence.

Paragraph 10.1: The UKPITG to reconsider the incorporation of FECs within future UKPIs from a technical perspective.

Paragraph 10.2: UKPISG representatives of the four UK funding bodies to explore the numbers and significance of alternative providers in their nation with appropriate colleagues and Government departments.