

Suppression thresholds within the UKPIs

UKPITG 16/01

Issue

1. To consider the requirement for a new approach to the suppression of UK Performance Indicators (UKPIs) to ensure that the data is representative of the sector.

Recommendations

2. It is recommended that UKPITG consider the potential to adopt a common standard for suppression thresholds to be used across the full set of UKPIs with regards to missing or unknown data.
3. UKPITG are also invited to consider the nature and scope of the evidence base that would be required to facilitate the identification of an appropriate common standard.

Discussion

4. At the December 2015 meeting, UKPITG members discussed paper UKPITG 15/06 "Response rates to the 2013/14 DLHE survey: impacts of changing the suppression threshold". The discussions followed concern that response rates to the 2013-14 Destination of Leavers from Higher Education (DLHE) survey had fallen to the level of the suppression threshold for a number of institutions.
5. An ambition to bring DLHE response rates closer to the target response rates was expressed at that meeting, and UKPITG took a decision to recommend suppression thresholds for the 2016 employment UKPIs increase to 90 per cent of the target response rate for a given population.
6. Upon passing the recommendation to the UK Performance Indicators Steering Group (UKPISG) a number of queries and concerns were raised. Specifically, UKPISG members highlighted the following issues:
 - a. Clarity was required as to the alignment of UKPI suppression thresholds with other sources of public information, such as those drawing upon the National Student Survey: a common standard for suppression thresholds across all public facing outputs from HESA and/or the UK funding bodies for HE was suggested.
 - b. Confirmation was required as to the basis for UKPITG's selection of the suppression threshold as 90 per cent of the target response rate. In the absence of an evidence base detailing the impacts of non-response bias on the national and institutional levels, and the extent to which non-response bias was present at different response rates, UKPISG members expressed reluctance to support the selection of an apparently arbitrary choice of response rate.
 - c. Concern was expressed regarding the timing of the proposed change. HESA's ongoing fundamental review of destinations and outcome data, as well as development of the Teaching Excellence Framework, could mean that poorly timed changes to the use of DLHE data within the UKPIs could be perceived as pre-empting those processes. In the absence of an evidence base indicating that adjustment of suppression thresholds based on response rates would resolve issues

of non-response bias, UKPISG members were concerned that an increase mid-way through a collection cycle would be unhelpful.

7. At the same December 2015 meeting, members discussed the level of unknown data in the state school UKPIs for a small number of institutions. For a small number of institutions (following a change to the reporting of PREVINST in 2014-15 HESA student data returns), proportions of entrants with unknown previous school information exceeded 50 per cent. UKPITG considered the potential suppression of the state school UKPIs on the basis of high proportions of unknown previous school. It was noted that this was currently a decision that rest with the relevant funding body for the individual institution in question.
8. Further discussions between HESA and the funding bodies highlighted additional concern about adoption of suppression techniques in an improvised fashion. Support was expressed for the adoption of a common standard for suppression thresholds across all of the UKPIs.

Further information

9. For further information contact Alison Brunt (Phone: 0117 931 7166; e-mail: a.brunt@hefce.ac.uk) or Mark Gittoes (Phone: 0117 931 7052; email: m.gittoes@hefce.ac.uk).