

UK Performance Indicators Steering Group

Minutes of the UK Performance Indicators Steering Group held at 13.00 on Monday, 26 October 2015 at Finlaison House, London

Present:

Members:	Heather Fry	Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) [Chair]
	Neha Agarwal	Office for Fair Access (OFFA), attending on behalf of David Barrett
	Colin Campbell	Universities Scotland
	Celia Hunt	Higher Education Funding Council for Wales (HEFCW)
	Kieran Mannion	Department for Education and Learning, Northern Ireland (DEL)
	Kevin Mundy	Universities Wales
	Martin Smith	Scottish Funding Council (SFC)
	Jonathan Waller	Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA)
Secretariat:	Alison Brunt	HEFCE
	Mark Gittoes	HEFCE

Apologies:

	Paul Clark	HESA
	Mark Corver	UCAS
	Colette Eley	Welsh Government
	Professor David Phoenix	Universities UK
	Paul Rasch	Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (BIS)
	Ryan Scott	Scottish Government
	Adam Wright	National Union of Students (NUS)

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 the previous meeting, and matters arising

2.1. Members noted a lack of clarity in the minutes with regard to their intentions for the development of the Widening Participation (WP) UK Performance Indicators (UKPIs) and use of experimental statistics. It was noted that members fully intended for the first

publication of WP indicators as experimental statistics during 2016 to include coverage of both young and mature cohorts. Subject to this clarification, members accepted the minutes as a true and accurate record of the meeting.

2.2. UKPISG noted that the minutes of their April 2015 meeting contained a large number of actions: many of these would be covered elsewhere in the agenda, and in the update from the UK Performance Indicators Technical Group (UKPITG) in particular, while some remained outstanding. Given the likelihood that this meeting would generate a number of further actions, members considered that it would be helpful to tabulate the actions arising from both meetings and to provide an overview of the current position on each.

ACTION: Secretariat to circulate a tabulation of current and recent actions arising from UKPISG meetings, to include an indication of their current status.

2.3. MG provided an update on HEFCE's work on differential outcomes and learning gain, as requested at paragraph 4.3.3 of UKPISG's April 2015 minutes. It was reported that HEFCE had published their most recent analysis of 'Differences in degree outcomes' during September 2015, which communicated the sector-level picture. HEFCE were piloting an approach to better understand the issues and/or challenges associated with differential degree outcomes at the institution-level: the ambition was to upskill institutions, enhancing institutional understanding and engagement with those challenges. It was confirmed that HEFCE had no immediate plans to publish institution-level information in this area.

2.4. With regards to HEFCE's work on learning gain (or value added), it was reported that a number of institution-led pilot projects had been commissioned to look at different aspects of learning gain, and that these were expected to report in 3 to 5 years. HEFCE were also exploring the development and validity of a standardised test model of learning gain measurement, as well as the potential complementarity of the Wabash method (used by a number of liberal arts colleges in the United States). MG noted that HEFCE's work on learning gain was at a very early stage, and unlikely to fall within scope for UKPIs in the near future. UKPISG agreed that they would maintain a watching brief on developments in this area.

ACTION: HEFCE to provide further updates in relation to differences in degree outcomes and learning gain at appropriate points in the development of these projects.

3. Report from the UK Performance Indicators Technical Group (Oral item and minutes from the July 2015 UKPITG meeting)

3.1. JW updated the group on a number of the items discussed by UKPITG in July 2015. It was noted that UKPISG had agreed at their April 2015 meeting to the separate publication of the widening participation and retention indicators in order to facilitate earlier publication of the WP UKPIs. JW indicated that HESA's intention was to continue to publish the retention indicators in mid-March and the employment indicators in early July. HESA hoped to publish the existing WP indicators in early February 2016, although it was noted that data quality concerns regarding the PREVINST variable (used in the derivation of the state school indicator within Table 1 of UKPIs) may have an impact on the feasibility of such timing. All of these publication tranches would involve the existing

coverage of publicly-funded UK HEIs (plus University of Buckingham) only: it was reported that publications including the extended coverage (of HE students in publicly funded colleges and at alternative providers) would take the form of experimental statistics, to timetables that were currently under consideration by UKPITG. UKPISG confirmed that if time allowed, they would agree the specific publication dates for each tranche of the 2016 UKPIs by correspondence. It was also agreed that if timescales for taking that decision were compressed, it would be taken by the UKPISG Chair under Chair's action.

ACTION: Publication dates for the 2016 publication of WP and non-continuation indicators to be agreed by UKPISG by correspondence or Chair's action depending on timing available.

3.2. The group were updated with HESA's current understanding of data quality concerns regarding the PREVINST variable. It was reported that coverage of this field was likely to be patchy, with HESA exploring a number of mechanisms to attempt to fill any gaps. While an updated mapping of school codes and UKPRNs had been submitted by UCAS, HESA would need to do further work to establish how this might impact on the quality of the 2014-15 data submissions.

3.3. Members queried whether credibility or verification checks were currently employed in relation to the PREVINST variable and high volumes of 'unknown' or generic school type entries. HESA confirmed that this was not currently in place. It was suggested that UKPITG may wish to consider the introduction of a suppression threshold for an institution's unknown PREVINST values in the 2016 state school indicator if 2014-15 data quality proved to be especially poor.

ACTION: UKPITG to maintain a watching brief in relation to the quality of PREVINST data submitted in 2014-15 data returns, and consider the use of appropriate suppression mechanisms as necessary.

3.4. JW provided the group with confirmation from UKPITG that registration with the Open University's national centres was based on the student's country of domicile. Members agreed that the decisions they were taking were funding neutral, and that the OU's registration practices would remain stable, and robust to changes in HE funding and policy. UKPISG gave their approval for disaggregated information for the Open University to be included in UKPI publications.

ACTION: HESA to publish 2016 and subsequent UKPIs with students registered at the Open University disaggregated on the basis of the OU national centres.

3.5. An update on UKPITG progress in the development of new WP indicators was provided to UKPISG. JW reported that it was UKPITG's ambition for the experimental statistics to be published to a similar timetable as the current Tranche 2 publication of UKPIs in early July. UKPISG members requested that the new statistics be published at least one week apart from the employment UKPIs, in order to clearly differentiate their experimental status from that of the formal UKPIs.

ACTION: In proposing publication dates for experimental indicators, UKPITG to ensure that they propose date(s) which sit at least one week apart from the publication of existing UKPI measures.

3.6. The priorities for UKPITG's current development work were reported to be those identified by UKPISG as high priority at their April 2015 meeting. These were measures based on: entrants' household residual income; entrants who had been in receipt of free school meals during their schooling; entrants from schools with low proportions of pupils progressing to further study; and entrants from different school or further education institution types. UKPITG would begin development work in mid-2016 on those WP measures previously identified by UKPISG as lower priority.

3.7. It was reported that UK-wide availability and comparability of data (and school data definitions in particular) was proving the most significant challenge in development work to date. UKPITG felt that development of measures based on entrants' HRI were the most feasible for introduction in 2016, and that development of these measures added particular value in terms of the likelihood that they could provide coverage of mature entrant cohorts as well as young. UKPISG members noted that Northern Ireland was known to have lower thresholds for HRI in their student support package than other parts of the UK, and that UKPITG would therefore need to ensure that appropriate mitigations were in place to counter issues around comparability of income thresholds across the UK nations.

3.8. In terms of the development of nation-specific measures of area-based disadvantage, it was noted that England UKPITG representatives had confirmed the continued use of the POLAR3 classification in relation to young cohorts at English institutions. Use of the HE-qualified adult classification would be introduced for area-based measures for mature cohorts at English institutions. UKPITG were expecting other nations to report to their next meeting on the selection of their own area-based measures. It was noted that any selections should make explicit reference to the impact of that decision in terms of the coverage of both young and mature cohorts.

3.9. UKPITG representatives of the UK nations had each been tasked with exploring the development issues with data availability that were pertinent to their nation. Having distributed that work at their July meeting, JW anticipated findings of that exploratory work being brought to the next meeting of UKPITG (planned for late 2015).

3.10. JW also reported on UKPITG progress in the fundamental review of the benchmarking approach. It was noted that the work had been subdivided into four distinct areas, with members also subdivided to contribute across those areas. UKPISG were informed of two possible influences over the timescales for making changes to the benchmarking approach used within UKPIs. The first was the requirement to announce changes to UKPI benchmarks 12 months in advance of them being made in accordance with the status of UKPIs as Official Statistics.

3.11. The second was the review itself. If the review were to determine that relatively minor refinements to the benchmarking approach were all that was required, then UKPITG considered that they may be able to publish experimental benchmarks for both existing and experimental indicators to the same timetable as 2016 publication of experimental WP indicators. If more fundamental change was found to be required then such a timetable may not be feasible.

4. Development of the Teaching Excellence Framework and other Green Paper related matters

4.1. HF reported that development of the Teaching Excellence Framework was very much within BIS' control at the present time. It was anticipated that development of the TEF would outpace UKPI developments. The TEF would include metrics within it and colleagues within HEFCE's analytical services directorate (including members of the secretariat) were providing BIS with advice and interpretation around the existing UKPIs in this context.

4.2. UKPISG considered that it would be important for the secretariat to maintain an awareness and engagement with BIS' development of TEF as it moved forward, and vice versa in terms of maintaining BIS' understanding of UKPI developments. Members also considered the England-only nature of TEF developments, and that care was required to maintain their own UK-wide remit. It was felt important that UKPI principles and due process were not undermined, but that development of measures within the purview of UKPISG being aligned with development of TEF metrics would be to the benefit of a large number of UKPI users and stakeholders.

4.3. Scotland noted legislation relating to the fee levels charged by their institutions to UK and EU students that permitted that fees were no higher than elsewhere in the UK, and the potential but indirect impact of TEF for institutions in their nation. In setting their own fees for 2017-18 academic year, it was likely that Scottish institutions would require an understanding of maximum fee levels available to institutions in England. It was noted that this information would be needed before Summer 2016 in order to inform prospectuses and course descriptions, particularly given the increased interest of the Competition and Markets Authority in the coverage, completeness and accuracy of institutions' information for prospective students

4.4. Members also noted the potential for TEF to seek a measurement of value added, or learning gain, and that this had been identified via the 2013 fundamental review of the UKPIs as a new area in which new UK-wide measures could be introduced (see 2.3 and 2.4 above). It was acknowledged that measurement of learning gain was of particular priority in England following the decisions taken separately by each of the UK nations not to participate in the OECD's Assessment of Higher Education Learning Outcomes (AHELO) project.

4.5. HF noted speculation that the Government's forthcoming Green Paper on higher education in England would propose regulatory or legislative change. UKPISG acknowledged a need to monitor the differences of UK HE policy and the evolution of the regulatory landscape for HE across the UK nations. It particularly noted the potential impact of regulatory change on data reporting practices, and those reporting practices currently driven by funding purposes in particular. A further acknowledgment was made that UKPIs could become increasingly challenging on account of different nation-specific perspectives, but that the principle of the UK-wide approach was still appropriate and desirable.

5. Responses to "Invitation to comment on future changes to the UK Performance Indicators" and consideration of UKPISG's next steps (UKPISG 15/04†)

5.1. HF noted that HEFCE had drafted an analysis of responses to UKPISG's July 2015 "Invitation to comment on future changes to UKPIs" that had been shared with the group. It was emphasised that this remained very much in draft form and required further

refinement prior to publication. In particular, with many responses taking the form of comment, further clarity would need to be incorporated in terms of the numbers and profile of respondents giving positive, negative and neutral responses. An overarching commentary would also be required, which also outlined UKPISG's response to the feedback, and their next steps.

5.2. The group agreed that their ambition should be to publish the analysis of responses before Christmas 2015. The secretariat were asked to finalise the analysis, providing the clarifications and supplementary commentary requested, in order that UKPISG could agree the publication by correspondence.

ACTION: Secretariat to share a finalised draft of responses to UKPISG's July 2015 "Invitation to comment on future changes to UKPIs", and an outline of UKPISG's next steps. Members to agree the draft by correspondence in order to facilitate publication in December 2015.

5.3. Members considered some of the emerging issues highlighted by respondents to the invitation to comment. The group felt that the responses highlighted the absence of a clear consensus among stakeholders in terms of what new WP measures might actually look like. While acknowledgement of the need for change was fairly widespread, there was little agreement discernible from the comments received on the direction(s) of that change. Members considered that the introduction of experimental statistics would be helpful in this regard, in terms of facilitating a period of user testing, further feedback and future endorsement. Use of a basket of measures was compatible with the feedback.

5.4. The need for a clear articulation, and reassurance, of the purposes, principles and ambitions for UKPIs was also perceived on the basis of responses received. Members agreed that achieving greater visibility of the UKPIs principles was critical as change was taken forward. In particular, highlighting that UKPIs were intended to serve long standing, strategic priorities (rather than short term concerns) while acknowledging that some stakeholders did make use of UKPIs in attempting to address shorter term priorities. Interpretation of the UKPIs use of 'targets' (or lack thereof) also needed to be clarified, especially in light of extended coverage of UKPIs to include alternative providers and further education colleges with HE provision, where new audiences were less familiar with the UKPIs' approach.

ACTION: UKPITG to consider potential improvements to the visibility of UKPI principles and purposes.

5.5. A number of issues relating to data quality and/or availability were highlighted among the responses. Members acknowledged the sensitivities among respondents in relation to use of data sources that were beyond the control of HE providers, as well as relating to a potential increase in data burden if UKPISG sought to capture social disadvantage more widely (one of the longer term priorities for WP UKPI development work).

5.6. The continued availability of data no longer in use in UKPIs was also considered in this context (such as the National Statistics Socio-Economic Classification NS-SEC), with a particular focus on its future robustness. Members considered the potential for a deterioration of data quality if the information was not being used in high profile outputs

such as the UKPIs and recognised that this was a potential risk. UKPISG felt that data owners would need to maintain validation and verification processes and the group committed to continue to work with UCAS to maintain the quality of information that it had previously sourced for use in UKPI measures.

5.7. It was noted that respondents from other UK nations were over-represented proportionally, by comparison with respondents from England. Quite strong support had been recorded for retaining a level of UK-wide comparability within a set of WP UKPIs, and use of the nation-specific Indices of Multiple Deprivations (IMD) had been highlighted by a number of respondents. On the basis of queries from respondents as to the validity (or otherwise) of comparing the proportions students from the lowest quintiles of each nation-specific IMD measures across the UK, members agreed that use of IMD may warrant further re-consideration: if only to provide a clearer narrative articulating the differences and difficulties in comparability across the UK's different IMD measures.

ACTION: UKPITG to re-examine the potential use of IMD measures in the manner described with a view to, as a minimum, clarifying the validity of UK-wide comparisons based on the lowest quintiles of each nation-specific IMD.

6. Review of the Research indicators, and next steps (UKPISG 15/05†)

6.1. HF introduced the paper, noting that an expert group had been convened to participate in a roundtable discussion on 7 September 2015. It was reported that the group had engaged in fruitful discussions that had generated a number of clear recommendations as well as a number of areas for further consideration. HF indicated that UKPISG now needed to provide a steer to UKPITG as to areas of priority for the development of experimental statistics in the area of Research.

6.2. Members reflected on some of the overarching messages emerging from the roundtable discussion. It was noted that international comparisons were a clear concern for users, as was the ability to provide an accurate reflection of activities that were interdisciplinary or collaborative in nature, and members noted that these issues were unique to this area of UKPIs.

6.3. The presentation of Research UKPIs as a range or basket of measures was felt to be key, with some of the concerns regarding presentation likely to be mitigated to some extent by the position of any one measure within a wider mix of indicators. Members agreed that this perspective reinforced a similar message that had emerged from the WP roundtable discussions and supported the approach that UKPISG had elected to take with regard to the new WP experimental statistics.

6.4. The group were invited to note the roundtable discussions on the topic of Open Access and Research Impact. The expert group had acknowledged that these were a particularly challenging prospect, despite being of substantial interest, and UKPISG concurred with the sentiment. It was agreed that, as a first step, UKPISG would seek to engage with NESTA and others with an understanding of these agendas, and seek to maintain a watching brief. Measures in these areas were not felt to be of immediate high priority but a longer term interest, especially in light of the guidance received from the expert group that the REF was a robust and effective source of information regarding Research impact.

ACTION: UKPISG secretariat to facilitate engagement with NESTA and other appropriate bodies in order to secure additional insights regarding Open Access and Research Impact.

6.5. The potential for overlaps between UKPI measures proposed by the expert group and the measures included within the Snowball Metrics project were recognised, and UKPISG acknowledged the challenges that this introduced. These were particularly prominent in terms of engaging in a constructive dialogue with representatives of that project, while at the same time taking care not to facilitate a misperception that the group were responding to a relatively narrow spectrum of research intensive institutions' priorities.

6.6. In identifying priorities for UKPITG's next steps in the development of new Research indicators, members noted that both UKPISG and UKPITG as well as external stakeholders needed to be furnished with realistic expectations of what was deliverable. On the basis that REF had filled the gap in Research UKPIs in 2015, but would not continue to do so in 2016, a clear ambition for publishing at least a small number of new experimental Research indicators at some point in 2016 was recorded.

6.7. UKPISG considered that it was acceptable that the number of new Research indicators published in 2016 was very small in the first instance, and/or that publication was not until late 2016, if additional indicators became available a short time later. UKPITG were asked to provide an assessment of the feasibility of publishing some experimental indicators in the Research area during December 2016.

6.8. UKPITG's assessment was to include: consideration of the skills and expertise held within UKPITG's membership, as well as their available resource; an initial understanding of the feasibility of each of UKPISG's proposed indicators; and identification of those proposals most deliverable if it proved too challenging to progress all of the proposed indicators before the end of 2016. It should also comment on the direction of any bias in the indicator(s) proposed, and reflect on UKPISG's clear guidance that a range of Research measures should not all be biased in the same direction.

ACTION: UKPITG to provide the requested assessment of the feasibility of publishing some experimental Research indicators during December 2016.

6.9. Balancing desirability and practicality, UKPISG determined that the basket of experimental indicators that they wished UKPITG development to initially focus on included:

a) Citation-based measures

Based on feedback from expert group members, inclusion of citation-based measures was felt to be key and a high priority for development work.

ACTION: UKPITG to explore the development of a UKPI measure based on citation measures as a matter of high priority, for possible introduction to a 2016 publication of experimental research indicators.

b) PGR student success measures

It was noted that a number of measures of PGR student success already existed, but that there were a range of possibilities to be explored in greater depth. It was

noted that measurement of non-continuation and projected outcomes was already included in the UKPIs for undergraduate cohorts, and employed approaches that were potentially transferable to other student cohorts, including postgraduates.

UKPISG recorded a strong preference for measuring the actual outcomes and successes of PGR students, as opposed to projections of outcomes, and accepted that this may mean examination of less recent cohorts than existing UKPIs currently considered. Members also recognised the need to consider implications of and for a future review of the non-continuation UKPIs if retention was introduced as an aspect of PGR student success.

UKPISG also acknowledged that there would be particular interest in variations in PGR student success by subject area and by source of funding.

ACTION: UKPITG to explore the development of UKPI measure(s) based on PGR student success as a matter of high priority, for possible introduction to a 2016 publication of experimental research indicators.

c) Diversity of research students and staff

Members noted that information on the diversity of research student and staff populations was available from existing staff and student data collections. The particularly challenging aspects of these measures would be the sophistication and nature of the diversity that might be of interest, as well as the population definitions employed (research focused populations, or more generic ones).

ACTION: UKPITG to explore the development of UKPI measure(s) based on research student and staff diversity as a matter of high priority, for possible introduction to a 2016 publication of experimental research indicators.

6.10. UKPISG noted that in their selection of these three areas, they were taking a pragmatic approach based on securing timely development. In this context, members considered that these were the most likely options at the current time: data availability in these areas was generally considered to be good, although methodological and definitional challenges were not to be underestimated.

6.11. Members noted that research income would be a more policy-level driver that may be worthy of pursuing. It was noted that the proposal by some expert group participants to normalise measures of research activity or output by an institution's research income profile was a challenging one. While information on research income might be sourced from HESA or research funders, UKPISG perceived particular difficulties in benchmarking and interpretation of income data in a UKPIs context.

7. Papers proposed as exempt from immediate publication (marked †)

7.1. Members agreed that both papers should be exempt from immediate publication. It was considered that paper UKPISG 15/04 was exempt on the basis that UKPISG had agreed to publish the responses to the "Invitation to comment on future changes to the UK Performance Indicators" later in 2015, along with UKPISG's commentary and subsequent next steps. Paper UKPISG 15/05 was considered to relate to policy in development and contained content that required the endorsement of those who had

attended the roundtable the paper discussed: the note of the roundtable meeting had not yet been agreed by its attendees.

8. Date of next meeting

8.1. The group felt that they should next meet in early 2016, most likely to align with a February meeting of UKPITG. It was likely that UKPISG would meet in February or March 2016, with dates to be agreed by correspondence.

9. Any other business

9.1. It was reported that Heather Fry would retire from HEFCE in early 2016. In the event that this proved to be her last meeting, Heather indicated that she presumed that her successor would also succeed to her role on the steering group, while members and the secretariat expressed their thanks for Heather's contribution and leadership of the group.

Meeting closed at 14:50