

National Statistics Quality Review of the Initial Entry Rate (as used in Higher Education Statistics)

Comments on this review, or any of the issues associated with it, are invited by 26 March 2003.

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Background

1. A Higher Education Working Group was formed in March 1999 to advise on Higher Education (HE) expansion, achievement of a HE participation target for 18-30 year olds and related funding issues. The group was chaired by Baroness Blackstone and drew members from across government and relevant agencies.
2. The Group decided that only HE level courses that lasted at least one year should be counted towards the 50% target. So, the IER currently excludes all entrants to HE courses that are expected to last less than one year, based upon information held on student record datasets. In Summer 2001 there were suggestions that some courses that lasted less than one year constituted a significant "HE experience" and so should be included in the target coverage. This was felt to be particularly relevant to "professional" courses taking place predominantly in Further Education (FE) colleges.
3. However, in the light of ongoing work, involving the Learning Skills Council (LSC) and the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (QCA), to validate qualifications awarded in FE colleges by external awarding bodies, it was decided to postpone any firm decisions until after this exercise is finished in Autumn 2003. (The QCA exercise is not concerned with course length but is concentrating on the academic level of study. It should result in a definitive list of HE level courses taking place in English FE colleges, irrespective of course length.)
4. Some opposition MPs and the press picked up on the course length debate and accused the Government of trying to "fiddle the figures". This led to an article in the Guardian of 18 December 2001 and the interest of the Statistics Commission. The Department for Education and Skills (DFES) wrote to the Commission in February 2002, suggesting that the National Statistics Education and Training Theme Working Group (TWG) examine the issues about the definition and monitoring of progress towards the published target.
5. The TWG proposed a number of activities to establish good practice and enhance public trust:
 - Instigating a targeted National Statistics Quality Review;

- Establishing a tight, transparent and agreed definition of what should be included in the IER as soon as possible;
 - Using HESA data from 1994/95 onwards, to form a suitable time series to underpin the agreed methodology for establishing initial entry to HE.
6. Separately to the IER issue, there have been concerns about the adequacy of information about the income of students and their families, and the socio-economic background of students. It was decided to extend the proposed Quality review on the IER to cover this issue also.

Terms of reference

7. The proposed Terms of Reference are as follows:
- a. **To undertake a rigorous assessment of the current method for calculating the Initial Entry Rate (IER),** including
 - i. The criteria for deciding what should be included in the IER (this should cover the courses to be included (e.g. vocational courses) and whether course length should be used as a criterion);
 - ii. Assessing the likely impact of the QCA review of the academic level of course on the IER in the light of the criteria suggested at i) above
 - iii. Comparisons with the methodologies employed by other countries/agencies where appropriate;
 - iv. The relationship to the PSA target of 50% participation;
 - v. The needs and views of a wide range of “customers” including ministers, policy colleagues and outside interests; and
 - vi. Any recommendations to be made by end April 2003.
 - b. **To suggest appropriate methods of improving external confidence in the statistic** including the appropriate channel for publication
 - c. **To review the information currently available on the social class and financial circumstances of HE students and how it might be improved to meet changing user needs.**

Process

8. The proposed review will be managed through a Review Board. The Board will be chaired by Malcolm Britton as Head of Profession for Statistics in DFES and include stakeholders (e.g. the Higher Education Funding Council for England, the Higher Education Statistics Agency, the Learning and Skills Council, the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority, the Office for National Statistics, a university representative, policy colleagues and representatives from the devolved administrations. Professor Brian Ramsden (retired Chief Executive of the Higher Education Statistics Agency) is leading the review. He has

administrative and technical support from Analytical Services Directorate in the department for Education and Skills.

9. The review will have three main stages:
 - a. Stage 1: Scoping the review, consulting major users and identifying major issues to be addressed;
 - b. Stage 2 Undertaking investigations and developing options and discussing them with users and other stakeholders; reporting emerging findings;
 - c. Stage 3 Producing the final report and recommendations.

10. National Statistics reviews are designed to assure users and producers that the outputs produced are fit for purpose and are produced with integrity. Relevant review documents will be made via the National Statistics website; these will include:
 - the Project Initiation Document;
 - Final review report, with response by the National Statistician; and
 - Initial implementation plan (within 3 months of the final report being released)

Timetable

11. The Review has the following milestones:
 - a. First meeting of Review Board during week beginning 6 January 2003;
 - b. Professor Ramsden to give an interim report to the Review Board by late February;
 - c. Final reports and recommendations of i) and ii) above by end April 2003.