

National Statistician and Registrar General

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9 May 2002

Dear Malcolm

HIGHER EDUCATION STATISTICS QUALITY REVIEW REPORT

Thank you for submitting this report, which I welcome and approve. This letter is my formal agreement for the publication and dissemination of the report. There are a few recommendations which prompt my specific endorsement.

I strongly endorse the recommendation (page 21, para 28) to agree and use standard populations and definitions for all the referenced NS outputs containing HE data. Defining and using standard classifications is a requirement of the Code of Practice and will be reinforced by the Protocol on Statistical Integration. I would expect the various producers to get together to achieve this, reporting - as the recommendation states - to the Education and Training Theme Working Group.

I endorse the recommendation (page 25, para 15) to bring together information on HE sources and outputs into a readily available index for users. Likewise I endorse the proposed enhancements to the user consultation processes.

The report raises two areas of concern in terms of elements of higher education statistics being duplicated or not well covered.

In England there may be some duplication of students in FEI counts and HEI counts e.g. where an HEI has franchised a course to a FEI. It is important that these boundary issues be resolved or statistics run the risk of being meaningless, in particular for movements in the statistics over time. I note that FE/HE boundary issues are being considered by the QCA and that further statistical work will need to wait for this process. I agree that this is sensible but I would expect the implementation plan for the review to cover this ground.

I note that higher education provided by the private sector is not comprehensively covered. This is typical of a government administrative based system, and will give rise to all the usual problems if the proportion of HE provided by the private sector changes as a result of

government policy. I endorse the recommendation that this is further investigated by the Education and Training Theme Working Group, while noting the pervading nature of government based systems to produce these problems.

The report raises two tricky issues associated with deciding what should be in National Statistics scope from a quality perspective.

The report identifies an area of concern in relation to a time series of Scottish data (para 15 page 16). If there has indeed been a break in concept, and no measurement of the effect on the data series, as this review has found, then a break in the series should be prominently flagged in the data, or it should be withdrawn from National Statistics. I would expect this could be effected by the Scottish Executive as a matter of routine and good professional practice, rather than having to await a formal implementation plan.

The second is more general , and is the issue of the inclusion of non NS sourced data in NS publications. The report has recommended that the Quality and Methodology Programme Board come up with a view on the Quality Assurance necessary for such inclusions to be reasonable. I don't have a problem with that.

I note the lessons learned which you highlighted in your letter. I welcome the fact that these have been set out and I understand that they have already been shared with the Education and Training Theme Working Group. I am sure they will also be useful to ONS staff responsible for compiling and updating general quality review guidance. Indeed we find feedback from each review to be very important in this respect.

Finally, I repeat my general approval of this report, noting the numerous sensible and challenging recommendations which I look forward to the various parties taking forward.

Yours sincerely



Len Cook