

department for

education and skills

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25 July 2003

Dear Len,

NATIONAL STATISTICS QUALITY REVIEW: INITIAL ENTRY RATE INTO HIGHER EDUCATION

1. I attach the final report of the Review submitted to me by Professor Brian Ramsden (formerly Chief Executive of the Higher Education Statistics Agency) and agreed by the Project Steering Group for your consideration and approval
2. I personally chaired the Steering Group as Head of Profession for Statistics within DfES. I am content that the Review was properly conducted and maintained its objectivity throughout. The Steering Group had a wide representation of key stakeholders including Marta Howarth from ONS. Appendix 1 to the Report provides a list of those who were consulted. This includes Margaret Hodge who at the time was the Minister for Higher Education.
3. Section 1 of the report (pages 4-6) provides an Executive Summary; but this needs to be read in conjunction with Section 7 that provides the detailed recommendations.
4. I think it is also worth summarising the background to the Review:
 - The Higher Education Working Group was formed in March 1999 to advise on 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 DfEE, HEFCE, FEFC, DTI, HMT and the No. 10 Policy Unit.
 - The Group decided that only HE level courses that lasted at least one year should be counted towards the 50% target. This was a self-imposed



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restriction by the DfES and was not related to the definition of HE level study used by Universities or other HE qualification awarding bodies. (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.)

- DfES Ministerial changes in 2001 caused the debate over course length to be reopened. This led (in Summer 2001) to 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 FE colleges.
- 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. In my capacity as Head of Profession for Statistics and with the agreement of policy colleagues, I 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.
- The TWG discussed how it might improve the external credibility of the Department’s methods for measuring and monitoring the IER target (and other targets more generally). This view was that a statistically robust and independently- approved methodology should be established, which ensures that the IER meets the objectives of those who will be users of it – primarily Ministers and the Department - and is demonstrably objective. The details of the methodology would be placed in the public domain through the normal process of releasing statistical publications - ideally as National Statistics - to ensure that the definition and the means of calculating it are as transparent as possible.
- 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.

Information on social class and financial circumstances of HE students

- Separately to the IER issue, the Minister commented on the (now published) National Statistics Quality Review of HE Student Statistics. She had concerns about whether this exercise would ensure that we have statistical information that is fit for purpose. She felt the data we have to be inadequate because we know very little about numbers of students, the income of students and their families or the socio-economic background of students. In the event we advised the Minister that the publication, already endorsed by the National Statistician, would have to go ahead and be published, but we would deal with the point she had raised by extending the proposed Quality review on the IER.

5. You will see from the recommendations that it is proposed that the IER, to be re-named the *Higher Education Initial Participation Rate* (HEIPR), should be published under the National Statistics umbrella. I think this is very important. It gives the measure credibility in its use for monitoring the Government's 50% target. There are also lessons here for how performance targets should not be set without a clear public explanation of how they are measured and will be monitored.
6. Finally, the Statistics Commission are taking a keen interest in the outcome of this Review. They have been asking when the outcome of the Review will be published and we have indicated September. In the meantime action is being taken to implement the recommendations which Ministers here have already accepted.

Best wishes,

Malcolm Britton

Malcolm Britton
Head of Profession for Statistics for DfES.