
Chair of the UK Statistics Authority, Sir Michael Scholar KCB

Rt. Hon. Dr Vincent Cable MP
Secretary of State for Business Innovation and Skills
Department for Business, Innovation and Skills
1 Victoria Street
LONDON
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Dear Dr Cable

STATISTICAL EXPENDITURE REPORT: WIDENING PARTICIPATION IN HIGHER EDUCATION, STATISTICS FOR ENGLAND

Please find enclosed a report by the UK Statistics Authority reviewing your Department's decision to make changes to statistics for England on *Widening Participation in Higher Education*.

The Statistics Authority has concluded that the changes were made appropriately but that it would be helpful to users to publish further detail on the responses to the consultation, including individual responses where possible, and the impact that these changes are expected to have on users of these statistics. The Statistics Authority also makes a number of suggestions for the Department to consider when carrying out future consultations on its statistics.

We hope that you find our report useful, and we would welcome any thoughts you may have on our conclusions.

Yours sincerely



Sir Michael Scholar KCB

UK STATISTICS AUTHORITY

Statistical Expenditure Report 7: Widening Participation in Higher Education, Statistics for England

Statistical Expenditure Reports review significant changes to UK official statistics. This report has been prepared and issued independently by the UK Statistics Authority.

In August 2011 the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (BIS) published its latest data for *Widening Participation in Higher Education*¹, headlining for the first time on an analysis of progression rates for young people in England by free school meal (FSM) receipt and school type. The release replaced the previous Widening Participation release, *Full-time Young Participation by Socio-Economic Class (FYPSEC)*², last published in July 2010, which measured progression rates by socio-economic classification. The FSM statistic had previously been published as an annex within the 2010 release.

BIS consulted on the proposed changes to the statistics between 8 June and 1 August 2011, a period of seven and a half weeks. It received 30 responses from a range of organisations, including universities, government departments, bodies representing Higher Education institutions, academics and local authorities. BIS concluded that respondents were not opposed to the use of FSM as the basis for measuring 'widening participation', with the majority agreeing that the FYPSEC measure was flawed and that there was scope for using a range of measures rather than solely FSM. The findings from the consultation were presented as an annex to the 2011 release, though the final decisions taken by BIS are not specifically listed.

The Statistics Authority has concluded that the change was made appropriately but that it would be helpful to users to publish further detail on the responses to the consultation, including individual responses where possible, and the impact that these changes are expected to have on users. The Statistics Authority also makes a number of suggestions for BIS to consider when carrying out future consultations on its statistics.

The statistics covered

The statistics in question are those presented annually as a measure of the progress of children from disadvantaged backgrounds to Higher Education. They reflect government's ongoing interest in monitoring educational achievement and narrowing the gap between disadvantaged young people and their peers. The statistics are used for impact indicator 3a within the BIS Departmental Business Plan³: 'The proportion of 15 year olds from low income backgrounds in English maintained schools progressing to HE by the age of 19.'

The Full-time Young Participation by Socio-Economic Class (FYPSEC) measure was introduced in 2007; it showed the proportion of 18, 19, and 20 year olds from the top three and bottom four socio-economic classes who participate in full-time higher education for the first time. Data were collected from the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) Student

¹ <http://www.bis.gov.uk/analysis/statistics/higher-education/official-statistics-releases/widening-participation-in-higher-education/analysis-of-progression-rates-for-young-people-in-england-by-free-school-meal-receipt>

² <http://www.bis.gov.uk/analysis/statistics/higher-education/official-statistics-releases/widening-participation-in-higher-education/full-time-young-participation-by-socio-economic-class-2010-update>

³ <http://www.bis.gov.uk/about/business-plan>

Record, with estimates based on home postcodes where HESA data were unavailable, or otherwise allocated based on a distribution.

The free school meal (FSM) measure was first published in 2010 and shows the proportion of 15 year olds who are eligible and those who are not eligible for FSM progressing to Higher Education by the age of 19. The indicator covers those in the maintained sector at age 15 and includes both full-time and part-time study in Higher Education at age 19. It can be disaggregated at a local authority level and uses matched datasets from the National Pupil Database (NPD), Individualised Learner Record (ILR) and HESA Student Record. Eligibility criteria for pupils who receive free school meals are set out in the technical annexes. It is not clear what impact on the results changes to these criteria would have, and what proportion of pupils are eligible but do not claim.

Government proposals

In June 2011, BIS issued a public consultation⁴ regarding the content of the publication and made three proposals:

1. Methodological change: That FYPSEC is replaced with the FSM measure, reflecting perceived weaknesses with the SEC variable and additional benefits from using the FSM approach.
2. Publication format and contents: That these were to be updated based on the use of FSM as the core measure, including data at a local authority level.
3. New statistics on access to the most selective third of institutions by school type: That a new metric is to be developed and published showing progression rates into the highest tariff universities by school type.

The consultation document identified a number of weaknesses with the SEC measure, some of which were likely to develop further over time. These included: a limited response from students on the socio-economic class of their higher-earning parent's occupation; a degree of error in the class reported by students; and an increasing proportion of students for whom the SEC is unknown. In addition, potential changes to the SEC variable in future would affect continuity.

The findings from the consultation were published within an annex to the August 2011 statistical release. This confirmed that the FSM measure had been adopted for the release and described how the scope of the publication had been altered in three ways:

1. It was being made clearer that the FSM and selective universities measures were being published as part of a range of measures, all of which have different strengths and limitations.
2. Detailed explanations of different measures and their limitations had been published.
3. An Excel table of the FSM measure by local authority had been made available.

Statistics Authority view

Despite limited information being available about the response to the consultation, the Statistics Authority concludes that BIS had a suitable evidence base for its decision to move to the free school meals measure of 'widening participation'. The measure makes use of existing data sources, has a clear methodology, and provides consistency with other measures such as the Government Social Mobility Strategy and Pupil Premium, which also include FSM as a metric. It also enables disaggregation at a local authority level.

⁴ <http://www.bis.gov.uk/Consultations/statistics-disadvantaged-children-higher-education>

The Statistics Authority suggests that it would be helpful to users if BIS were to publish further detail on the responses to the consultation, including individual responses where possible, the impact that these changes are expected to have on users, and the cost impact of this change. With the consultation closing so close to the publication of the 2011 results, it would have been helpful for the FYPSEC measure to have been published as an annex to allow users to consider the consistency between these measures.

The technical annexes to the 2011 release set out the eligibility criteria for pupils who receive free school meals. We understand that these criteria have not changed in recent years (apart from a change to the income threshold forming part of the 'Tax Credit' free school meal eligibility category) but, mindful that the criteria might change in future, we would encourage BIS to take account of any such changes in the presentation of these statistics in future. More detail would be welcome on the proportion of pupils who are eligible but do not claim.

The Statistics Authority also has the following suggestions for BIS to consider when carrying out future consultations on its statistics:

- Where possible, proposed changes to methods should be flagged up in a preceding statistical release.
- As advised in the *Code of Practice for Consultations*, a minimum period of 12 weeks should be allowed for consultations in normal circumstances.
- More balanced information should be presented on the alternative measures under consideration with positive and negative aspects presented for each of these. Where limitations are identified, specific detail should be provided if possible; for example, where non-response is described as a data collection issue, this should be quantified and a figure provided.