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Sir Michael Scholar KCB  
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Dear Michael,

**Higher Education statistics**

I am writing to you in relation to the statistical release entitled 'Participation Rates in Higher Education: Academic Years 1999/2000-2007/08' [HEIPR], which was published on 31 March 2009 by the Department for Innovation, Universities and Skills and National Statistics (<http://www.dcsf.gov.uk/rsgateway/DB/SFR/s000839/index.shtml>). In particular, I am concerned about the lack of advance warning about the methodological changes to this data and also about how these changes have blocked year-on-year comparisons. In contrast to past methodological changes, the HEIPR figures for earlier years have not been recalculated on the new basis.

The annual HEIPR dataset shows the proportion of different age groups reaching higher education. It is this data that is used to judge progress against the Government's commitment to ensure half of all young people gain experience of higher education – it is, for example, the official way of measuring progress against the Government's Comprehensive Spending Review target to 'Increase participation in Higher Education towards 50% of those aged 18 to 30 with of at least a percentage point every two years to the academic year 2010/11'. As a result, the HEIPR is arguably the single most important dataset on higher-level skills. Yet, because of the new changes, it is no longer possible to make an assessment of medium to long-term trends.

Since the HEIPR data started being produced, the figures have gone through a series of changes. For example, just two years ago, there were various major changes, including a new matching technique to ensure that only students with at least six months' prior experience of higher education were discounted from the data. These were significant enough



to alter the figures by one to two percentage points for each year as well as affecting the trend over time. But, to ensure comparability, all the figures were recalculated back to the start of the dataset in 1999/00.

This year, the data have been subject to yet more significant methodological changes. Once again, a key change involved the treatment of students with prior higher education experience of six months or more, and a new method has been used to calculate these students who are then discounted. This has had a big impact on the figures which is helpful to ministers in pursuit of the 50% target: according to National Statistics ‘the impact of the new methodology is to increase the HEIPR by 2.3 percentage points.’ This rise is larger than past annual increases in the HEIPR. However, the historical data has only been recalculated on the new basis for a single year, 2006/07 and so it is not possible to work out whether the long-term trend is favourable or not. The new data were accompanied by a note warning that ‘The latest figures (for 2006/07 and 2007/08) are therefore not comparable to the historical time series.’

A further contrast with the previous round of changes is that there seems to have been no prior warning this time. Last time, the change was announced in April 2006, nearly a year before it took effect, and a separate release was published three weeks before the 2007 data appeared which outlined the methodological changes and provided updated figures for all years back to 1999/00.

*Higher Education Initial Participation Rate (HEIPR) for English-domiciled first-time students aged 17 to 30 on Higher Education courses*

%	Current		Previous		Original	
	Final	Provisional	Final	Provisional	Final	Provisional
1999/00	-	-	39.2	-	40.5	-
2000/01	-	-	39.6	-	41.5	-
2001/02	-	-	40.2	-	42.3	-
2002/03	-	-	41.1	-	43.4	-
2003/04	-	-	40.3	-	42.3	-
2004/05	-	-	40.1	41.3	-	42.0
2005/06	-	-	42.5	42.8	-	-
2006/07	42.1	-	39.8	39.8	-	-
2007/08	-	43.3	-	-	-	-

Given that the HEIPR dataset only exists for the years since 1999/00 and was first published just five years ago, it has gone through the most tremendous number of changes. The table above shows a complete set of



data from the start, including the alternative figures that have been provided for single years. It is abundantly clear from this table that it is harder than it should be to judge the Government's record against their targets.

I would be grateful if you could possibly provide the UK Statistics Authority's view on the following five questions:

1. Is it acceptable for the HEIPR dataset to be subject to large methodological changes of the sort introduced this March without any prior consultation or even warning?
2. Have there been sufficient grounds for the frequent and major methodological changes to this dataset that have occurred since it first appeared in 2004?
3. Should the HEIPR now be recalculated for historical years using the new methodology so that year-on-year comparisons can still be made?
4. Should more detailed information be placed in the public domain about the most recent set of methodological changes?
5. How robust is the final data for 2006/07, as calculated under the old methodology, given that it is identical to the provisional data for that year and when, in every previous year, there has been a fall between the provisional and the final data?

Given the fast pace of change in so many other countries' higher education systems, it is essential that we have robust information by which we can track our own record. This is especially important given recent changes in the UK, such as the introduction of variable tuition fees in England in 2006/07, and the current economic recession, which is likely to affect the demand for higher-level skills. So I look forward to your comments on this very important issue.

Yours ever  
David

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