

Assessment of compliance with the Code of Practice for Official Statistics

Statistics on Higher Education in Northern Ireland

*(produced by the Department for
Employment and Learning, Northern
Ireland)*

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About the UK Statistics Authority

The UK Statistics Authority is an independent body operating at arm's length from government as a non-ministerial department, directly accountable to Parliament. It was established on 1 April 2008 by the *Statistics and Registration Service Act 2007*.

The Authority's overall objective is to promote and safeguard the production and publication of official statistics that serve the public good. It is also required to promote and safeguard the quality and comprehensiveness of official statistics, and good practice in relation to official statistics.

The Statistics Authority has two main functions:

1. oversight of the Office for National Statistics (ONS) – the executive office of the Authority;
2. independent scrutiny (monitoring and assessment) of all official statistics produced in the UK.

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ASSESSMENT AND DESIGNATION

The *Statistics and Registration Service Act 2007* gives the UK Statistics Authority a statutory power to assess sets of statistics against the *Code of Practice for Official Statistics*. Assessment will determine whether it is appropriate for the statistics to be designated as National Statistics.

Designation as National Statistics means that the statistics comply with the *Code of Practice*. The *Code* is wide-ranging. Designation can be interpreted to mean that the statistics: meet identified user needs; are produced, managed and disseminated to high standards; and are explained well.

Designation as National Statistics should not be interpreted to mean that the statistics are always correct. For example, whilst the *Code* requires statistics to be produced to a level of accuracy that meets users' needs, it also recognises that errors can occur – in which case it requires them to be corrected and publicised.

Assessment Reports will not normally comment further on a set of statistics, for example on their validity as social or economic measures. However, Reports may point to such questions if the Authority believes that further research would be desirable.

Assessment Reports typically provide an overview of any noteworthy features of the methods used to produce the statistics, and will highlight substantial concerns about quality. Assessment Reports also describe aspects of the ways in which the producer addresses the 'sound methods and assured quality' principle of the *Code*, but do not themselves constitute a review of the methods used to produce the statistics. However the *Code* requires producers to "seek to achieve continuous improvement in statistical processes by, for example, undertaking regular reviews".

The Authority may grant designation on condition that the producer body takes steps, within a stated timeframe, to fully meet the *Code's* requirements. This is to avoid public confusion and does not reduce the obligation to comply with the *Code*.

The Authority grants designation on the basis of three main sources of information:

- i. factual evidence and assurances by senior statisticians in the producer body;
- ii. the views of users who we contact, or who contact us, and;
- iii. our own review activity.

Should further information come to light subsequently which changes the Authority's analysis, it may withdraw the Assessment Report and revise it as necessary.

It is a statutory requirement on the producer body to ensure that it continues to produce the set of statistics designated as National Statistics in compliance with the *Code of Practice*.

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1 Summary of findings

1.1 Introduction

1.1.1 This is one of a series of reports¹ prepared under the provisions of the *Statistics and Registration Service Act 2007*². The Act requires all statistics currently designated as National Statistics to be assessed against the Code of Practice for Official Statistics³. The report covers the following National Statistics publications produced by the Department for Employment and Learning (DEL), Northern Ireland:

- *Enrolments at UK Higher Education Institutions: Northern Ireland analysis*⁴;
- *Qualifications gained at UK Higher Education Institutions: Northern Ireland Analysis*⁵; and
- *Destinations of Leavers from Higher Education: Northern Ireland*⁶.

1.1.2 This report was prepared by the Authority's Assessment team, and approved by the Board of the Statistics Authority on the advice of the Head of Assessment.

1.2 Decision concerning designation as National Statistics

1.2.1 The Statistics Authority judges that the statistics covered by this report are readily accessible, produced according to sound methods and managed impartially and objectively in the public interest, subject to any points for action in this report. The Statistics Authority confirms that the statistics listed in paragraph 1.1.1 are designated as National Statistics, subject to DEL implementing the enhancements listed in section 1.5 and reporting them to the Authority by March 2011.

1.3 Summary of strengths and weaknesses

1.3.1 DEL engages with both government and non-government users of its higher education (HE) statistics. In 2010 DEL published the results of a consultation with non-government users of HE statistics but it has not published the views of government users. DEL plans to carry out further consultation about all its education statistics in early 2011.

1.3.2 DEL includes some details about the quality of the statistics in its publications but there is scope to publish more information on the methods and data sources it uses and the quality of the data. DEL carries out additional quality assurance to that undertaken by the data suppliers.

¹ <http://www.statisticsauthority.gov.uk/assessment/assessment-reports/index.html>

² http://www.opsi.gov.uk/Acts/acts2007/pdf/ukpga_20070018_en.pdf

³ <http://www.statisticsauthority.gov.uk/assessment/code-of-practice/index.html>

⁴ http://www.delni.gov.uk/he_enrolments_0809.pdf

⁵ http://www.delni.gov.uk/he_qualifications_0809.pdf

⁶ http://www.delni.gov.uk/dlhe_statistical_bulletin_0708.pdf

1.3.3 The DEL statistical team monitors the queries it receives from users to identify common trends in requests, and has developed a series of detailed 'fact sheets' which cover these common areas.

1.3.4 DEL does not provide data tables in a re-usable format which limits the flexibility for users to analyse and re-use the data. Users generally found the statistical publications to be accessible but there is scope to improve the presentation of the outputs by, for example, including more insightful commentary.

1.4 Detailed recommendations

1.4.1 The Assessment team identified some areas where it felt that DEL could strengthen its compliance with the Code. Those which the Assessment team considers essential to enable re-designation as National Statistics are listed in section 1.5 below. Other suggestions, which would improve the statistics and the service provided to users but which are not central to their designation, are listed at annex 1.

1.5 Requirements for designation as National Statistics

Requirement 1	Provide users with information about HESA's ⁷ methods for collecting and analysing the data which DEL uses in its higher education statistical publications (para 3.8).
Requirement 2	Provide more information on the quality of the statistics, including the main sources of bias and other errors (para 3.10).
Requirement 3	Publish links to the quality guidance used in managing the production of its higher education statistics (para 3.11).
Requirement 4	Improve the commentary and analysis in its HE statistical publications to aid users' interpretation and understanding (para 3.24).
Requirement 5	Make statistics available in formats that allow analysis and re-use, and provide appropriate guidance and supporting documentation (para 3.28).

⁷ The Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) provides data to DEL which DEL uses to compile its HE statistics publications.

2 Subject of the assessment

2.1 DEL uses data collected by the Higher Education Statistics Agency⁸ (HESA) to compile its higher education (HE) statistics publications. HESA was established in 1993 as the official UK agency for the collection, analysis and dissemination of quantitative information about HE. HESA has a formal agreement with DEL to provide the data which DEL requires for its HE statistical publications.

2.2 The three annual publications cover various aspects of HE in Northern Ireland:

- *Enrolments at UK Higher Education Institutions: Northern Ireland analysis* ('*Enrolments*') provides details of all students enrolled at Northern Ireland Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) and students from Northern Ireland enrolled at UK HEIs for each academic year. The publication uses data from the HESA Student Record⁹ and contains various breakdowns of the data, for example by age group, mode of study, level of study, location and subject of study.
- *Qualifications gained at UK Higher Education Institutions: Northern Ireland Analysis* ('*Qualifications*') provides details of all students gaining HE qualifications at Northern Ireland HEIs and HE qualifications gained by students from Northern Ireland at UK HEIs. The publication also uses data from the HESA Student Record and contains similar data breakdowns to the *Enrolments* publication.
- *Destinations of Leavers from Higher Education: Northern Ireland* ('*Destinations*') provides details of the destinations – for example, work or further study – of leavers from higher education who obtained qualifications in Northern Ireland HEIs and Northern Ireland leavers from HE who obtained qualifications in UK HEIs. The publication uses data from HESA's *Destinations of Leavers from Higher Education (DLHE) Survey*¹⁰ which replaced the former *First Destinations Supplement (FDS)* in 2002/03. DLHE provides more detailed information than FDS, allowing more comprehensive analyses.

Editions of all three publications since 1996/97 are available on DEL's website.

2.3 DEL's HE statistics are used for a variety of purposes, including:

- providing evidence to inform and monitor Northern Ireland HE policies, strategies and reviews. These include the development of a HE strategy for Northern Ireland¹¹, and DEL's *Widening Participation Strategy*¹² to attract students from disadvantaged backgrounds and students with learning difficulties and disabilities;
- informing the work of other Northern Ireland government departments – for example, *Enrolments* data are used to provide an indicator in the education domain of the Northern Ireland Multiple Deprivation Measure¹³;

⁸ <http://www.hesa.ac.uk/>

⁹ <http://www.hesa.ac.uk/index.php/content/view/1743/128/>

¹⁰ http://www.hesa.ac.uk/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=98&Itemid=137

¹¹ <http://www.northernireland.gov.uk/news/news-del/news-del-october-2009/news-del-211009-higher-education-crucial.htm>

¹² <http://www.northernireland.gov.uk/news/news-del-260510-views-sought-on>

¹³ http://www.nisra.gov.uk/deprivation/nimdm_2010.htm

- providing background material for research studies and reports – for example, the DEL-commissioned research project on the future requirement for skills in the financial services industry in Northern Ireland¹⁴;
- responding to ad hoc information requests from users (around 200 per year) and the Northern Ireland Assembly (around 25 per year); and
- monitoring progress against Northern Ireland government targets to increase the number of students studying science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM subjects)¹⁵.

2.4 DEL told the Assessment team that it currently costs around £15,000 a year to prepare and publish the three HE statistical bulletins included in this assessment. These costs cover data analysis, formatting and publishing the statistical outputs, responding to queries about HESA data in DEL's publications, and attending meetings with HESA to discuss HESA's data collections.

¹⁴ <http://www.delni.gov.uk/index/pubs-statistics-and-research/s-and-r-research/stats-research/stats-research-current-projects.htm>

¹⁵ <http://www.northernireland.gov.uk/pfgfinal.pdf>

3 Assessment findings

Principle 1: Meeting user needs

The production, management and dissemination of official statistics should meet the requirements of informed decision-making by government, public services, business, researchers and the public.

- 3.1 DEL's HE statisticians hold annual meetings with government colleagues to discuss current HE statistics, future releases and their needs for the data. In February 2010, DEL carried out a survey of around 100 non-government users to gather their views on the timing, relevance and presentation of HE statistical publications. The survey also asked respondents what they used the statistics for. Sixteen users responded and DEL published the questionnaire and the results of the survey¹⁶ on its website. DEL plans to further consult both non-government and government users about all its statistical publications and to hold a meeting with these users in early 2011 to discuss their needs. DEL plans to publish the results of this consultation – including users' views – in spring 2011.
- 3.2 HESA provides HE data to all four UK administrations at the same time. The timetable for the release of DEL's HE publications¹⁷ is determined by the dates of HESA's statistical outputs. HESA discusses potential dates with DEL several months before it publishes its statistical outputs. As soon as these dates are established, DEL confirms the publication dates for its publications. These are usually two to three weeks after HESA publishes its data. During this period DEL prepares the statistical publications and associated briefings.

¹⁶ http://www.delni.gov.uk/questionnaire_outcome.pdf

¹⁷ <http://www.delni.gov.uk/index/statsandresearch/statistics.htm>

Principle 2: Impartiality and objectivity

Official statistics, and information about statistical processes, should be managed impartially and objectively.

- 3.3 The statistics team publishes Northern Ireland HE statistical reports according to a published timetable and makes the statistics available free of charge on its website. It presents the statistics impartially and objectively.
- 3.4 DEL includes information about changes to classifications in its statistical publications – for example, a change to a HESA population specification was announced in the 2007/08 *Enrolments* publication. DEL's HE statisticians informed us that, where appropriate, they will also announce changes to classifications in advance of the release of the changed statistics.
- 3.5 DEL has published a revisions policy¹⁸, though there have been no revisions to DEL's HE statistical publications and no errors have been discovered in the reports.

¹⁸ http://www.delni.gov.uk/del_statistics_revision_policy-2.pdf

Principle 3: Integrity

At all stages in the production, management and dissemination of official statistics, the public interest should prevail over organisational, political or personal interests.

- 3.6 No incidents of political pressure, abuses of trust or complaints relating to professional integrity, quality or standards were reported to or identified by the Assessment team.
- 3.7 Senior statistical staff within DEL decide on the format and content of all DEL statistical publications and statistical press releases¹⁹, and issue these separately from any policy comment. The Permanent Secretary of the Northern Ireland Department of Finance and Personnel (DFP) has briefed Northern Ireland Ministers and senior officials within DEL on the *Code of Practice for Official Statistics*, and they have agreed to the principle of statistical independence. The DFP Permanent Secretary has issued guidance to Northern Ireland public servants, including DEL staff, on implementing the Code.

¹⁹ http://www.delni.gov.uk/index/press-releases/press-releases-july10-september10/higher_education_statistics_published_by_department_for_employment_and_learning.htm

Principle 4: Sound methods and assured quality

Statistical methods should be consistent with scientific principles and internationally recognised best practices, and be fully documented. Quality should be monitored and assured taking account of internationally agreed practices.

- 3.8 The data in DEL's HE publications are derived from two HESA data collections – the Student Record, which is used for both the *Enrolments* and *Qualifications* publications, and the *Destinations of Leavers from Higher Education* collection, which provides data for the *Destinations* publication. HESA publishes details of the methods it uses to collect and analyse the data in its most recent publications but DEL does not publish this information or direct users to HESA's website. As part of the designation as National Statistics, DEL should provide users with information about HESA's methods for collecting and analysing the data which DEL uses in its HE statistical publications²⁰ (Requirement 1).
- 3.9 DEL informed the Assessment team that HESA uses extensive quality assurance procedures for the data it collects and supplies to DEL. DEL cross-checks the data in its HE publications against the data in HESA's publications to ensure that they are consistent.
- 3.10 DEL includes information about definitions and classifications in its HE publications but there is scope to include more details about the quality of the statistics – for example, there may be non-sampling errors such as response bias. As part of the designation as National Statistics, DEL should provide more information on the quality of these statistics, including the main sources of bias and other errors²¹ (Requirement 2).
- 3.11 DEL is participating in ongoing work with the Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency (NISRA) and the Office for National Statistics (ONS) to develop quality guidelines and in the interim is using the ONS publication *Guidelines for measuring statistical quality*²² as a framework for reporting on data quality issues. As part of the designation as National Statistics, DEL should publish links to the quality guidance used in managing the production of its HE statistics²³ (Requirement 3).
- 3.12 In September 2008 PricewaterhouseCoopers published a report²⁴ of a review of the quality and efficiency of the production of HE data across the UK. DEL statisticians were members of the steering group for this review. The report identified the main burdens and operational barriers to delivering HESA data, improvements to the existing process, and set out a plan to implement the improvements. Following the review HESA established a new national data collection user group²⁵ to improve communication between HEIs and HESA, and the data collections HESA is responsible for.

²⁰ In relation to Principle 4 Practice 1 of the Code of Practice

²¹ In relation to Principle 4 Practice 1 of the Code of Practice

²² <http://www.statistics.gov.uk/STATBASE/Product.asp?vlnk=13578>

²³ In relation to Principle 4 Practice 4 of the Code of Practice.

²⁴ <http://www.hefce.ac.uk/pubs/rdreports/2008/rd19%5F08/>

²⁵ <http://www.hesa.ac.uk/index.php/content/view/1594/292/>

- 3.13 When DEL announced a change to a HESA population specification in the 2007/08 *Enrolments* publication, it highlighted that – in order to produce a consistent time series – all historical data would be based upon the revised definition. DEL advised users of this change in the publication.
- 3.14 DEL’s HE statistical publications contain information about students at Northern Ireland HEIs and students from Northern Ireland at UK HEIs. The publications do not include any comparisons with corresponding HE statistics from other UK countries or internationally, although HESA provides comparisons of HE statistics for countries of the UK. We suggest that DEL promote the comparability of HE statistics across the UK by signposting equivalent statistical outputs from the four countries and documenting any differences in its approach.

Principle 5: Confidentiality

Private information about individual persons (including bodies corporate) compiled in the production of official statistics is confidential, and should be used for statistical purposes only.

- 3.15 DEL has published its arrangements for confidentiality protection²⁶. These include physical and technical security, disclosure control, guidance on complying with data protection legislation and providing data to third parties, and staff training. DEL keeps confidentiality records relating to HE statistical records which it shares with third parties.
- 3.16 DEL is aware of the confidentiality arrangements used by HESA. HESA informs students about the uses that will be made of their data, and how their confidentiality will be protected.
- 3.17 Only statisticians within DEL's HE Statistics Unit can access its HE datasets. These datasets do not contain the names of individuals. In all DEL's HE statistical publications, figures are rounded to the nearest 5 to prevent the identification of individuals. This approach is in line with HESA's rounding strategy. Percentages in DEL's publications are based on the rounded figures. DEL informed the Assessment team that this approach provides the optimal trade off between maximising the utility of the statistics and protecting confidentiality.
- 3.18 The standard terms and conditions of employment for all Northern Ireland statisticians include confidentiality arrangements, and NISRA is currently consulting its HR department about the need for a further confidentiality declaration in addition to these terms and conditions. DEL staff have recently signed an agreement to agree to adhere to the principles of the Data Protection Act as part of the IT system log-on procedure. All DEL staff are required to complete mandatory training on data protection awareness.

²⁶ <http://www.delni.gov.uk/index/publications/r-and-s-stats/stats-research-del-confidentially-statement.htm>

Principle 6: Proportionate burden

The cost burden on data suppliers should not be excessive and should be assessed relative to the benefits arising from the use of the statistics.

- 3.19 All the data in DEL's HE statistical publications are collected by HESA before being passed to DEL. As HESA would collect these data even in the absence of DEL's HE statistical publications, there is no additional burden on HESA to collect and supply data to DEL.

Principle 7: Resources

The resources made available for statistical activities should be sufficient to meet the requirements of this Code and should be used efficiently and effectively.

- 3.20 DEL produces an annual Business Plan which includes objectives, targets, user needs and performance measures, and identifies the staff responsible for achieving each target. The statistical team maintains a risk register of its activities and meets government users of the statistics every quarter to discuss progress against its business plan.
- 3.21 DEL does not have a specific budget for statistical work, as its statisticians are also responsible for delivering economic support, evaluation and research for the Department. The HE statistics team within DEL has access to central resources such as the DEL's IT and publications systems.
- 3.22 A team of three full-time statisticians manages the HE statistics. DEL informed the Assessment team that its level of staff resources restricts its ability to carry out development work or more extensive user consultation.
- 3.23 Recruitment of DEL statistical staff is competency-based, and statisticians' learning and competency frameworks are developed centrally by NISRA. All DEL statistical staff have personal development plans.

Principle 8: Frankness and accessibility

Official statistics, accompanied by full and frank commentary, should be readily accessible to all users.

- 3.24 DEL has developed the format and level of detail in its HE statistical publications over the last decade. The results of the February 2010 survey of non-government users suggested that users generally found the publications easy to access and well presented. However, the publications could be improved by including clearer explanation of the statistics, information about their importance and their likely use, drawing out the main messages, and setting out the operational context. As part of the designation as National Statistics, DEL should improve the commentary and analysis in its HE statistical publications to aid users' interpretation and understanding²⁷ (Requirement 4).
- 3.25 The *Enrolments* publication includes signposting for the Northern Ireland government's targets to increase the percentage of students studying STEM subjects (see paragraph 2.3).
- 3.26 DEL statisticians monitor the queries received from users (around 200 per year) to identify common trends among the requests. DEL has developed a series of 'fact sheets'²⁸ – for example, on equality categories, STEM enrolments and popular HEIs for Northern Ireland students – to cover these common areas. The fact sheets contain more detailed analysis on aspects of higher education than DEL includes in its statistical publications.
- 3.27 DEL maintains a list of users and notifies them of the publication of each HE publication. DEL publicises its statistical outputs in several ways including its website, NISRA's website, DEL's *Labour Market Bulletin*, presentations by DEL staff to (for example) Workforce Development Forums and Sector Skills Councils, the National Statistics Publication Hub, and in press releases.
- 3.28 DEL does not provide data tables in a form which allows users to analyse and re-use the data. As a part of the designation as National Statistics, DEL should make statistics available in formats that allow analysis and re-use, and provide appropriate guidance and supporting documentation²⁹ (Requirement 5).
- 3.29 DEL archives its statistics with the Northern Ireland Public Records Office, which accepts paper records and is currently developing retention and disposal procedures for electronic records. All Northern Ireland government departments operate the same electronic document and records management system.

²⁷ In relation to Principle 8 Practice 2 of the Code of Practice

²⁸ <http://www.delni.gov.uk/index/publications/r-and-s-stats/statistical-fact-sheets.htm>

²⁹ In relation to Principle 8 Practice 6 of the Code of Practice

Protocol 1: User engagement

Effective user engagement is fundamental both to trust in statistics and securing maximum public value. This Protocol draws together the relevant practices set out elsewhere in the Code and expands on the requirements in relation to consultation.

3.30 The requirements for this Protocol are covered elsewhere in this report.

Protocol 2: Release practices

Statistical reports should be released into the public domain in an orderly manner that promotes public confidence and gives equal access to all, subject to relevant legislation.

- 3.31 DEL has clear internal timetables for its HE statistics publications, and it publishes these outputs on the National Statistics Publication Hub.
- 3.32 There have been no delays in the production or publication of DEL's HE outputs. Final responsibility for the timing of publications rests with DEL's senior statistician.
- 3.33 DEL has published statements³⁰ on its website which detail its arrangements for ensuring compliance with the Pre-release Access to Official Statistics Order (Northern Ireland) 2009³¹ and early pre-release access to statistics³². DEL also publishes the pre-release access lists for each HE statistical publication³³.

³⁰ http://www.delni.gov.uk/compliance_statement.doc

³¹ http://www.opsi.gov.uk/sr/sr2009/nisr_20090071_en_1

³² http://www.delni.gov.uk/del_statement_of_early_pre-release_access_to_statistics-2.pdf

³³ http://www.delni.gov.uk/del_publication_and_pre-release_access_list.pdf

Protocol 3: The use of administrative sources for statistical purposes

Administrative sources should be fully exploited for statistical purposes, subject to adherence to appropriate safeguards.

- 3.34 All the data which DEL uses to compile its higher education statistical publications are derived from HESA datasets.
- 3.35 DEL has published a Statement of Administrative Sources³⁴ which includes access arrangements, arrangements for auditing data quality, and security information. We suggest that DEL include HESA in its Statement of Administrative Sources.

³⁴ http://www.delni.gov.uk/del_statement_of_administrative_sources_for_statistical_purposes.pdf

Annex 1: Suggestion for improvement

A1.1 This annex includes suggestions for improvement to DEL, in the interest of the public good. These are not formally required for designation, but the Assessment team considers that their implementation will improve public confidence in the production, management and dissemination of official statistics.

Suggestion 1

Promote the comparability of higher education statistics across the UK by signposting equivalent statistical outputs from the four countries and documenting any differences in its approach (para 3.15)

Suggestion 2

Include HESA in its Statement of Administrative Sources (para 3.36)

Annex 2: Summary of assessment process and users' views

A2.1 This assessment was conducted from April to July 2010.

A2.2 The Assessment team – Celia Macintyre and Phil Grigor – agreed the scope of and timetable for this assessment with DEL representatives in May. The Written Evidence for Assessment was provided on 30 June. The Assessment team subsequently met DEL during September to review compliance with the Code of Practice, taking account of the written evidence provided and other relevant sources of evidence.

Summary of users contacted, and issues raised

A2.3 Part of the assessment process involves our consideration of the views of users. We approach some known and potential users of the set of statistics, and we invite comments via an open note on the Authority's website. This process is not a statistical survey, but it enables us to gain some insights about the extent to which the statistics meet users' needs and the extent to which users feel that the producers of those statistics engage with them. We are aware that responses from users may not be representative of wider views, and we take account of this in the way that we prepare assessment reports.

A2.4 The Assessment team received 8 responses from the consultation with users. The respondents were grouped as follows:

Northern Ireland government departments	1
Other public sector organisations	2
Academia	4
Private sector	1

A2.5 Users were satisfied with the service they had received from DEL statisticians in terms of the timeliness and quality of responses to users' queries, and approachability. Some users would like DEL to publish more detailed information including further breakdowns in the *Enrolments* publication and student destination information after 12 months. One user commented that the publications could be improved by providing fuller analysis and commentary, and by highlighting the main points of the data to potential users.

Key documents/links provided

Written Evidence for Assessment document

