

Andrew Dilnot Esq
Chair
UK Statistics Authority
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Dear Mr Dilnot,

School and College (Key Stage 5) Performance Tables in England 2011/2012

I am writing to ask you to review the way in which the Department for Education (DfE) handles the publication of the School and College (Key Stage 5) Performance Tables which are described as "Official Statistics"; the tables were published at 9.30 am on Thursday 24 January 2013 in a way that implies they fall within the Code of Practice.

There are four reasons why we believe a review is necessary:

- **Lack of statistical commentary**

Although the DfE describes the Performance Tables as being official statistics, it does not produce a Statistical First Release nor, indeed, any commentary on the data. The Department simply provides access to individual data for approximately 3,000 institutions (Schools and Colleges) and makes a spreadsheet available for anyone to download. The lack of statistical commentary leaves the way open to a flurry of speedy commentary, some of it accurate, some of it less so. This year, someone carried out an "initial analysis" which showed that 600 institutions (1 in 4) did not have any pupils achieving A-levels at grades A, A and B in 10 subjects deemed by the Department to be facilitating subjects. This figure is particularly erroneous for reasons outlined in the Appendix to this letter but, in the absence of any commentary from government statisticians, it is not surprising that others come up with their own analysis.



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- **Pre-release arrangements**

This is the 20th year in which the Department (or its predecessors) has published “school league tables”. By a long established convention, the data is provided to journalists and news organisations 24 hours before official publication. Privileged access to league table data is so well established that these arrangements were protected in the Pre-Release to Official Statistics Order 2008. In an age of 24 hour television and twitter, these access arrangements are now positively harmful to a considered analysis of the data. Journalists are forced by their deadlines to come up with instant analysis of the data without any assistance from government statisticians and before the Schools or Colleges affected are able to provide some context or commentary for their data.

- **Misleading presentation of results**

Although these are official statistics, the way in which they are presented to the public is not impartial, objective or designed to promote public understanding. A member of the public looking for data about a particular School or College may arrive first at a page which presents 6 statistics, all of which are percentages. The most prominent statistic is the percentage of students getting A, A B grades in facilitating A-level subjects. The following table presents information for the three institutions in Winchester and is a good case study of how misleading the Department’s presentation of the data is – prioritising small focused institutions over large broad-based ones:


	Number of 16-18 year olds	Number of A-level students at end of KS5 study	Number achieving AAB in facilitating subject	The main statistic reported in KS5 table
Peter Symonds College	3,276	1,458	204	14%
Winchester College	275	78	3	4%
St Swithuns School	118	64	36	56%

- **Lack of analysis or testing to justify the presentation of the data**

The DfE made changes to the Performance Tables for the 2011/12 publication and explained these in a short statement of intent published in June 2012. The Department published no research to justify the new sets of data and introduced several new fields without properly testing their validity. Officials were willing to discuss the changes in autumn 2012 but at a point where decisions had already been made and apparently by Ministers rather than by departmental statisticians. The 17 different indicators do not allow users of performance tables (funders, parents and students themselves) to make informed decisions about the quality of provision.

In conclusion, we have a set of official statistics which are poorly explained, which are widely disseminated, which are presented in a very misleading way and which have been changed in 2012 on the instructions of Ministers rather than their statistical experts. Given that the UK Statistics Authority has a duty to protect the integrity of official statistics and an aim to maintain public confidence, I believe that it is imperative that you review this publication within the next few months to ensure that changes can be made in time for January 2014. I suggest that there are two broad choices for the Performance Tables in future:

- Either, DfE manages them to the same standard as other official statistics which would require a full and objective commentary on the results (perhaps via a Statistical First Release) and an effort to present the detailed data in a more meaningful and objective manner.
- Or, DfE accepts that the Tables constitute administrative data in which case they should not be described as official statistics and should be made available to all interested parties as soon as they are ready (without media pre-release arrangements).

Yours sincerely,


APPENDIX

ERRORS IN THE MOST COMMONLY QUOTED STATISTIC IN THE KEY STAGE 5 TABLES

Within a few minutes of the publication of the KS5 Tables in January 2013, media organisations reported an “initial analysis” showing that 600 institutions (1 in 4) did not have any pupils achieving A-levels at grades A, A and B in 10 subjects deemed by the Department to be facilitating subjects. This analysis has not been sourced and, despite enquiries, we have been unable to establish where it came from.

There are several reasons why this is a misleading statistic:

- Missed institutions
The KS5 tables include information for 3,032 Schools and Colleges but do not report % figures on the A, A B in facilitating subjects for the 210 institutions who did not have any A-level entries at all in 2012 or for the 74 institutions who had 5 or fewer entries. The actual number of institutions with no students achieving this new performance measure is 895, which is closer to 1 in 3.
- Selectiveness of data
The KS5 tables record 1,204, 145 students aged 16 to 18 against the 3,032 Schools and Colleges but only count 388,542 as being in the “KS5 cohort” of whom 267,130 are recorded as taking A-levels and another 3,888 took equivalent academic qualifications, making a total of 271,018 (23% of the total population). Some of the 895 Schools and Colleges with no students achieving the desired performance indicator concentrate on vocational qualifications, apprenticeships or academic qualifications at a lower level (ie GCSEs). The 895 institutions with no-one achieving A, A B in facilitating subjects accounted for only 11% of total A-level/academic Level 3 entries (30,662 in all).
- Facilitating subjects
DfE introduced the A-level facilitating subject measure for the first time in these performance tables without any published analysis to show which subjects should be included and which should not. The “Informed Choices” publication by the Russell Group lists other A-levels (for example Economics or Religious Studies) which are useful for a small number of courses at their member Universities and also analyses a range of other Level 3 courses that can act as entry requirements. The Russell Group publication is a well-written piece of consumer advice but is not intended to be a statistically-robust piece of analysis. It is worth noting that Russell Group Universities admitted about 75,000 home students to undergraduate courses in 2012 but that only 23,000 people are recorded as having A, A B in the ten facilitating subjects in the KS5 tables. In other words twice as many students did not have the qualification combination described as essential as had it.