

Our ref: 248869584

3 January 2018

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College Performance Indicators

Thank you for your letter of 27 October 2017 following your review of our College Performance Indicators (PI) publication. I would also like to thank you for our follow-up meeting on 15 December, which included John Kemp (Interim Chief Executive SFC) and Louisa McCutcheon from your office.

SFC welcomed the statement in your letter confirming that the College PI publication is clear and insightful. You had suggested some improvements that we could make to future publications to improve the trustworthiness and value of these statistics. SFC has been working continuously to enhance the robustness of our statistics and improve the presentation and accessibility of all our statistical publications. We therefore welcome the improvements you have suggested. I thought it would be helpful to set out our response to some of the issues you raised and the actions that we are taking in response.

We found the meeting we had very helpful in clarifying one of the issues raised in your letter, namely *“that lead data analysts have full editorial control of the content of publications and are sufficiently supported by you as chief analyst and the Scottish Government Chief Statistician where necessary”*. Within SFC we are keen to set the policy context that the statistics are set against, and to this end we expect our

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analysts to liaise and take input from the relevant policy teams. We also want to produce our full suite of statistical publications in a consistent format, i.e. a corporate style. You confirmed that this is appropriate, but that the lead analyst should ensure that the policy context and presentation should be neutral and free from any bias. This is in line with SFC's current arrangements, where the lead analyst, supported by myself, has full editorial control over the content and presentation of the publication but we are supported by colleagues, including policy colleagues, before drafting our publications on presentation and coverage and during the quality assurance process to ensure accuracy.

Your letter had stated that positive results appear to be significantly more prominent than negative results and that there were more references to completion rather than withdrawal. The report tracks successful completion of college courses over time, the key indicator is whether the successful completion rates are increasing or decreasing. We aim to give equal prominence to positive and negative results throughout the report and the withdrawals are clearly shown. SFC consults with the college sector and other stakeholders on the presentation of the PIs before drafting the publication. We had a recent meeting with sector representatives where we discussed the presentation of the PIs for future years. We have decided that the charts should be reformatted to show a combined withdrawal rate and the bars will show the percentage figure for completion and withdrawals.

You also asked us to ensure that as much data as possible is available to users for further analysis. The PIs were published in PDF format, but are made available in other formats including Excel to allow further analysis. With the PI 2015-16 report the Excel version was not available on our website but we will ensure, in line with our other publications, that tables are available on our website in Excel.

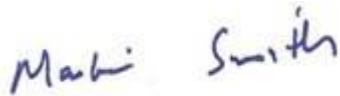
You also asked us to agree to publish pre-release access lists for each of our publications in line with the Code of Practice for Official Statistics, which should appear alongside the next official statistics release. We intend to provide this pre-release access list by job title for our National Statistics publications ('College PIs' and 'HE Students and Qualifiers').

As mentioned above we will provide a policy context for our statistics and this should help address your suggestion to explain more clearly within the publication the purposes for which these data should be used (and when other data sources would

be more appropriate). It is worth noting that we regularly review our statistical publications and consult with stakeholders and will look to provide more explanation of the purposes of the data in future publications.

I hope you will agree that while we strive to make improvements with our statistical publications the statistics are produced in line with the Code of Practice for Official Statistics – they are accurate and impartial and there is a proper quality assurance process surrounding their production to ensure that they can be trusted.

Yours sincerely,



Martin Smith

Chief Funding and Information Officer

Cc: John Kemp, SFC Interim Chief Executive
Roger Halliday, Chief Statistician, Scottish Government
Louisa McCutcheon, Statistics Regulator, Office for Statistics Regulation