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Dear Ed,

## **Temporary suspension of National Statistics status for Participation Measures in Higher Education**

Higher Education Analysis in the Department for Education is committed to publishing information about HE participation and outcomes to help prospective students make informed choices about where to study, to show how government policies have changed access to higher education over time and to facilitate further research and analysis to help understand the sector.

Participation Measures in Higher Education shows the proportion of 17- to 30-year-olds who are studying for level 4+ qualifications for the first time, meaning they have entered higher education without having undertaken any previous study at that level. It was initially introduced to measure progress towards the target set by a previous Labour administration for 50% of pupils to enter higher education by the age of 30, a target that is still being discussed in the media today and we are continuing to publish the measure as it still has relevance to the public debate about access to higher education.

While the methodology has been improved since the metric was originally introduced, a reasonably consistent time series is available spanning from 1999/2000 to 2019/20. The measure was reviewed in 2003 by Professor Ramsden, whose report recommended that the measure continued to be published, but noted some difficulties with the methodology, in particular for estimating participation rates for people from different social and ethnic backgrounds. We have therefore discussed with OSR steps we can take to further improve the methodology.

In order to calculate this figure, the measure sums participation rates for each age from 17 to 30 inclusive. This means that the HEIP measure is not a sum of the total number of initial entrants divided by the total academic year population as this would make the false assumption that participation is equally likely across all age groups. Further detail about the existing methodological approach can be found here.

The Department for Education have reviewed this methodology and believe it needs to be improved. This is because:

As Professor Ramsden noted, population statistics by age (the denominator of the existing measure) are not available by factors such as ethnicity, disability, and measures of societal advantage such as social class. Initial HE participation rates therefore cannot be produced separately for these sub-groups using the existing HEIP methodology.

The current methodology has the potential to overstate participation of individuals by age 30 if there is growth in the number of HE entrants at younger age groups (particularly 18 year olds). This is a trend we are currently experiencing; for example, the University and Colleges Admissions Service (UCAS) recently reported that a record number of 18 year olds – 44.1% - applied to enter HE by the 30 June 2022 deadline.

The change to cohort measures will improve the accuracy of the estimates and use an approach that is more intuitive to users, as previously stated.

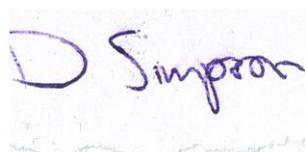
We therefore propose using an alternative approach to calculate this metric which is an extension of the methodology used up to age 19 in Widening Participation in Higher Education (WPHE) statistics. This approach matches data from the National Pupil Database to information from the Education and Skills Funding Agency (ESFA), the Individualised Learner Record (ILR), the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) Student Record and Alternative Provider Student Record. This allows pupils to be tracked from the age of 15 into higher education by age 30.

There are some key differences with the original methodology. For example, to align with the WPHE statistics, an individual is identified as being an HE participant under this cohort measure if they were enrolled in a course of study for at least two weeks, compared to six months using the original measure. However, DfE analysis suggests that estimates of initial entry rates at each age are broadly similar using both methodological approaches.

Given the public interest in this measure, we have determined that we should continue to produce an estimate of initial HE participation by summing age specific rates in the latest year available to construct an entry percentage on a consistent basis with the previous methodology and show how this is constructed from the new cohort data. This will allow for a continuation in the existing time series, for comparison with measures published by other UK nations, and make the information more accessible to users. Feedback will be sought about the new approach, and how DfE can best present information going forward.

As we are undertaking what is a substantial re-development of this publication, in accordance with the guidance we are seeking to temporarily suspend National Statistics designation. We will consider applying for re-designation once the methodological approach has been scrutinised.

Yours sincerely,



**David Simpson**  
**Head of Data Insight and Statistics & Head of Profession for Statistics**