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Director General for Regulation

Neil McIvor
Chief Data Officer and Chief Statistician
Department for Education

5 March 2020

Dear Neil,

We have received a query about your Higher Education Initial Participation Rate (HEIPR) release. Thank you for the help your team has provided as we have been looking into this query.

Having reviewed the latest release, I share some of the concerns raised with us and would like you to consider the methods and presentation of the HEIPR.

We understand that the HEIPR has been published as a National Statistic by the Department for Education (and former departments) since 2004 following a National Statistics Quality Review[1], which considered it an appropriate measure of progress towards the previous ambition to see 50 per cent of under 30s going to higher education. Maintaining a consistent approach to the measurement since then has ensured progress towards that goal could be tracked.

We are also aware that your approach to producing an estimate broadly aligns with the approach taken by OECD (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development) to make international comparisons of 'First-time entry rates to tertiary education' ('Education at a glance'). We encourage producers of statistics to follow international best practice and align methods to allow comparison whenever possible.

However, we do not consider the publication to be clear on the purpose of the HEIPR metric and what it intends to measure. It would be helpful to have more information to support users in use of these statistics. We would also encourage you to review use of the term 'rate' and consider an alternative description.

Your team highlighted the OECD working group paper to prioritise the development of graduate entry rate indicators, particularly regarding their interpretability. The aim of the paper was to provide a clearer understanding of the current indicator, including its underlying assumptions. It clearly recognises the difficulty in interpreting this metric – mirroring our own findings. It also highlights the limitations of the calculations, including that the rate can exceed 100%. While you do provide an explanation of the methods used to calculate the HEIPR, given the complexity and the risk of misinterpretation by users, we would encourage you to improve your methodology guidance notes.

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[1] https://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/20160128193641/http://www.ons.gov.uk/ons/guide-method/method-quality/quality/quality-reviews/theme/children--education-and-skills/nsqr-24/index.html

We understand that you are reflecting on the future relevance of the measure and will consult users in any developments. We would be grateful if you could keep us appraised of your plans.   We are considering a compliance check of the HEIPR statistics as part of our 2020-21 regulatory and will work with your team to consider how it can get most value from this.

Your sincerely

Ed Humpherson
Director General for Regulation