

Measuring higher education – a review of performance indicators: Russell Group submission

Question 1. What measures are you/your organisation aware of, or do you use, that assess the performance of higher education institutions? This might include a range of measures from different sources. Please be as specific as possible and provide examples of practice from across different parts of your organisation where possible.

The Russell Group is aware of a wide range of published measures of performance in higher education, drawn from different sources. These relate to teaching and research, the quality of the student experience, the management of institutions (e.g. their financial management and estates management), and measures looking at the diversity of their students and staff.

Question 2. How does your organisation currently use these measures, and the UK Higher Education Performance Indicators specifically?

The current set of UK Higher Education Performance Indicators includes information around:

- * Widening participation of under-represented groups
- * Non-continuation rates and module completion
- * Employment destinations of leavers
- * Research outputs.

Again, please be as specific as possible and provide examples of practice from across different parts of your organisation where possible. If your organisation does not currently use performance indicators, please use this box to provide the reasons why.

Alongside other information, we use the PIs to provide us with information about the higher education sector and to inform our policy development work, where applicable.

Question 3. Please list up to three strengths and three weaknesses with the existing UK Higher Education Performance Indicators. Again, please be as specific as possible. If you don't think there are any strengths or weaknesses, please write "none" in the appropriate section of the box below.

The existing PIs provide some useful information which is not available elsewhere about the relative performance of institutions in certain areas.

The benchmarks associated with the **Widening Participation** PIs are fundamentally flawed because they fail to provide a full picture of the student body actually qualified to enter many courses. They take no account of the fact, for example, that someone with four A*s at A-level might not have a strong chance of acceptance on a very competitive Medicine course, unless the A-levels are in the required subjects. Lord Browne's report on higher education (published in 2010) looked at this issue:

“The indicators do not take sufficient account of institutions' admissions requirements, e.g. an institution could perform worse against the indicators if it does

not admit students with no mathematics 'A' Level, even though mathematics may be considered by the institution to be a legitimate requirement for entry. We recommend that HESA works with institutions, UCAS and academic experts to develop indicators that have the confidence of the higher education sector and students."

Although the benchmarks now take into account the relative 'quality' of entry requirements, they still do not take into account an institution's specific entry requirements, as the Russell Group (and Lord Browne's report) has highlighted.

The benchmarks do not consider whether able students apply in the first place. Despite all our efforts to encourage applications from disadvantaged students, our universities cannot offer places to those who do not apply. The shortfall of applications from 'non-traditional' pupils is one of the main difficulties Russell Group universities face in widening participation.

By their nature these benchmarks are a 'moving target': if institutions with very different challenges meet their benchmarks, then this means the benchmarks for all universities become more challenging. Universities could meet them one year and fail the next with exactly the same intake. Therefore, performance against the benchmarks only gives an indication of an institution's performance relative to other institutions, and they do not give a very good indication of an institution's improvement in widening participation over time. It could be helpful for universities to have more information about how the benchmarks have been calculated so they can better understand how and why their benchmarks stay constant or change from year to year.

The robustness of some of the data used to calculate the WP benchmarks and PIs is questionable. For example, data on socio-economic class (SEC) is based on self-reported information from students about their parental occupation. We note that in 2011 BIS ceased the use of the SEC data in the National Statistics on overall participation in HE, citing concerns about the robustness and quality of the data. (BIS, *Consultation on statistics that measure the progress of children from disadvantaged backgrounds into HE*, June 2011). Consideration should perhaps be given to whether the SEC data in PIs remains sufficiently robust to be used in measuring the performance of individual institutions.

The state school PI is potentially misleading because it fails to take account of the diversity of both the state and independent school sectors.

The PIs on **Non-continuation and Module Completion** are quite complex. We would question whether many non-expert users can accurately interpret the data. Non-continuation is a very important aspect of university performance and consideration could be given to whether it would be feasible to simplify the measures in this area to make them accessible to a wider audience.

The main weakness of the **Employment Destinations** measure is the limitations of the DLHE data, and the fact that the survey is carried out only 6 months after graduation. However we recognise that there is no better data available. Graduate employment is another critically important aspect of HE performance, although this PI may have less impact than some of the others because comparative data on employment outcomes is more readily available from other sources, including in the KIS (at course level), and through the publication of DLHE data itself.

The **Research Output** PIs give only a partial picture of research performance. The most important indicator of research performance is the RAE results, which measures research quality. The RAE results, alongside the direct (or raw) HESA data showing the number of PhDs awarded, the total research grants and contracts income and the total academic staff costs per institution present a reasonable picture of research activity within the UK's

universities. It is unclear what additional value is added by aiming to normalise data through statistical methods to generate the existing PIs showing outputs per inputs.

It is difficult to consider the research PIs alongside the RAE results because attempts to map RAE/REF Units of Assessment (UoA) with HESA cost centres are problematic. Until there is a direct and consistent mapping between UoAs and cost centres, there will always be difficulties in making meaningful correlations between differently coded research datasets.

The research PI relating to PhDs also fails to account for research and teaching splits in the academic staff denominator, resulting in a failure to recognise and acknowledge the importance of quality in postgraduate supervision. We would expect the highest quality postgraduate research supervision to be conducted by active *research* academics.

Question 4. What do you think the purpose of the UK Higher Education Performance Indicators should be? Please be brief, limiting your response to up to 500 words. If you do not think performance indicators serve any purpose, please use the box to explain why.

Performance indicators should aim to present data in a way that helps universities to assess their performance against quantifiable measures. Any quantitative measure of this kind will have limitations due to the data being used: issues may include data quality, comparability, granularity, and availability. These limitations should be recognised, and it may be helpful to supply narrative alongside the numerical PIs to put them in context. The design of performance indicators should reflect the intended audience.

Question 5. In which specific areas do you think we need formal performance indicators to measure institutional performance in the higher education sector? Please list up to six topic areas. These can include areas covered by the existing UK Higher Education Performance Indicators or other sources, as well as areas not currently measured. If you do not think we need any performance indicators, please write 'none' in the box below.

The existing PIs are somewhat skewed (in terms of the amount of data published) towards performance in the two areas of widening participation and non-continuation. Consideration could be given to whether the overall suite of PIs could in the future present a more balanced picture of overall institutional performance across teaching, research and innovation.

Any future PIs should not require additional data collections from institutions. If possible, the quantity of data collected nationally from institutions should be reduced, in order to ease the costs and administrative burden on institutions, and allow them to redirect resources to their primary activities of, teaching, research and innovation.

Question 6. Is there anything else that you would like to say about measuring the performance of the higher education sector, or about the UK Higher Education Performance Indicators, bearing in mind the aims of the research? Please be brief, limiting your response to up to 500 words.

Published performance indicators may be used by a whole range of stakeholders including universities, regulatory and funding bodies, students, businesses, schools and colleges, the media, and the general public. Given the wide range of stakeholders with an interest in higher education, it is important that published information should be robust and relevant, and its limitations should be stated clearly.

The reputation of the UK's universities may be influenced in part by published data including performance indicators, and this should be considered carefully when collecting and publishing such information. Performance indicators may provide information about the relative performance of UK universities, and they might also be used to draw conclusions about the international competitiveness of UK higher education.

We also recommend that this review takes account of the behaviours that are likely to be driven by the performance indicators in question. There can be a risk of unintended consequences arising if undue emphasis is placed on individual measures. The body developing and publishing a performance indicator cannot control how it is interpreted by third parties, and in this context it becomes important to consider how the information is likely to be interpreted when developing proposals.

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