



Findings from the public consultation on statistics that measure the progress of children from disadvantaged backgrounds to higher education

On 8 June 2011, BIS released a public consultation regarding the content of this publication. The consultation closed on 1 August 2011. Thirty responses were received; respondents included 13 universities, 3 bodies representing groups of Higher Education Institutions, 2 Local Authorities, stakeholder bodies, government departments, a group of academics and a private individual.

Main themes from responses

Removal of FYPSEC

The majority of respondents agreed that the FYPSEC measure was flawed and there are serious data issues that would prove difficult to resolve. A large number of students do not declare their occupational information that is used to derive Social Class status. There were also concerns about the subjective nature of the data collective process that relied on the student's view of their parents' occupation. A small number of respondents did advocate retention of the FYPSEC measure as universities have access to the SEC data, and it is a broader measure of disadvantage than FSM.

Use of the FSM measure

Generally respondents were not opposed to using FSM, but were keen that the limitations were appreciated and explained¹. There was recognition that FSM is more robust than FYPSEC. There was support for using a range of measures, rather than FSM alone.

There were comments that FSM is a "blunt instrument"; it captures a narrow subset of the population, excluding those with incomes too high to claim FSM who may still

¹ These limitations are discussed for example in:

Vignoles, A.; Hobbs, G. (2009) 'Is children's free school meal 'eligibility' a good proxy for family income?'. *British Educational Research Journal*, Vol. 36, no. 4, pp.1469-3518, <http://www.ioe.ac.uk/study/departments/qss/756.html>

Kounali, Daphne; Robinson, Tony; Goldstein, Harvey & Lauder, Hugh (2008) 'The probity of free school meals as a proxy measure for disadvantage', Vol. Working Paper Bristol: Bristol University <http://www.bristol.ac.uk/cmm/publications/fsm.pdf>

be regarded as disadvantaged. It also excludes those who choose not to claim FSM. Some respondents noted that there may be regional differences in take-up rates that could distort interpretation. Capturing FSM receipt at a single point in time, together with the time lag between age 15 and entry to Higher Education, is an issue. It is possible to measure whether there is any record of a potential student having been on FSM since the data was first collected in 2002 and some respondents felt that using this data would capture a larger group that had experienced some period of disadvantage.

It was noted that FSM rates may be volatile because pupils with FSM are a small section of the population, and this population may be sensitive to policy and economic changes. In particular, the number of pupils with FSM may rise temporarily during an economic downturn, which may affect progression rates.

New measure on access to the most selective universities

Many respondents accepted that access to the most selective institutions is important in securing access to the top professions. However, there were some concerns about the limitations of this measure.

The definition of the 'most selective third' of institutions will change every year. The way these institutions has been defined does not necessarily capture the "value added" by lower tariff institutions. Some lower average tariff institutions may have exceptionally competitive courses with demanding entry requirements. A focus on high achieving A level (or equivalent) students introduces a subjective assessment of the relative status of different qualifications. Equally, there is no adjustment for those who pursue different qualifications i.e. Level 3 options (i.e. BTEC National Diploma) or subjects. Another issue is that there may be changes to the UCAS tariff score that could impact on how institutions are identified in terms of selectivity.

There were comments on disaggregating the rather broad state school definition by school type and admissions policy. In addition, the measure only looks at schools/colleges which offer post-16 education (population denominator will be 17 year olds). A large number of state schools, particularly those in disadvantaged areas are 11 to 16 schools and so these schools' performance in progressing young people to post 16 education is overlooked.

Changes following the consultation

After considering the responses received from users, the scope of this publication was altered in the following ways:

- Greater clarity that the FSM and school type/selective university measures are intended to contribute to the understanding of widening participation issues as part of a range of measures, which have different strengths and limitations.
- Detailed explanation of measures, including their limitations
- A table available in Excel format with time series of the FSM measure by local authority.

Longer term BIS will consider the consultation responses in improving widening participation statistics. In particular we will review issues related to school and college type; and will review the use of the FSM measure in discussion with the Department For Education, in the light of possible future changes.

© Crown copyright 2011

You may re-use this information (not including logos) free of charge in any format or medium, under the terms of the Open Government Licence. To view this licence, visit www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/doc/open-government-licence/ This publication is also available on our website at www.gov.uk/bis

URN BIS/11/1479