

# Statement

1 December 2009

## Code of Practice breach – release practices

### **Early Statistics on Student Support for Higher Education in England, 2009/10 (Department for Business, Innovation & Skills)**

The Department for Business, Innovation & Skills (BIS) has reported to the UK Statistics Authority a breach of the Code of Practice for Official Statistics. Published statistics on student support for higher education in England, released by the Student Loans Company on behalf of BIS, were inadvertently withdrawn. This was a result of a mis-communication about the status of a related policy release, which BIS had wanted to ensure was published separately from the release of the statistics to which it related.

The Authority notes that the statistics were unavailable for only a short period, and that statisticians in BIS acted quickly to get the statistics reinstated. The Authority also notes the steps taken by BIS to improve communication and management of the process of releasing data through the Student Loans Company. The Authority encourages all statistical producers to review any such procedures they have in place to ensure they are sufficiently robust to meet the requirements of the Code of Practice.

## BREACH OF THE CODE OF PRACTICE FOR OFFICIAL STATISTICS

A breach of the Code of Practice for Official Statistics occurs where one or more provisions of the Code were not followed in situations where an exemption or exception had not been approved by the UK Statistics Authority's Head of Assessment, as required in paragraph (xii) of the Code's preamble. Rules on pre-release access to statistics are covered in the relevant Pre-Release Access to Official Statistics Orders; the Code applies as if it includes these orders.

### 1 Background Information

Name of Statistical Output (including web link if relevant)

BIS/Student Loan Company (SLC): Early Statistics on Student Support for Higher Education in England, 2009/10 at 1 November 2009 (Provisional)  
<http://www.slc.co.uk/statistics/facts%20and%20%20figures/studentsupportstats3.html>

Name of Producer Organisation

The Student Loans Company (SLC)

Name and contact details of person submitting this report, and date of report

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### 2 Circumstances of Breach

Relevant Principle/Protocol and Practice

Protocol 2: Release practices "Statistical reports should be released into the public domain in an orderly manner that promotes public confidence and gives equal access to all, subject to relevant legislation"

"Release statistical reports as soon as they are judged ready, so that there is no opportunity, or perception of opportunity, for the release to be withheld or delayed."

Date of occurrence

10 November 2009

Nature of breach (including links with previous breaches, if any)

Due to high levels of public interest in the processing of Higher Education Student Support applications by Student Finance England, the SLC in conjunction with BIS analysts, agreed to provide early provisional figures to show the levels of processing and payment of Student Support in England for the 2009/10 academic year. The breach concerned the third of the three weekly releases, which had been pre-announced for 9:30 on 10 November. The figures were published on time but then withdrawn along with the pre-announcement information, pending the release of an SLC operational press notice. They were put back onto the website at 12:00 in the format originally planned and without any accompanying press notice.

Reasons for breach

The day before the release, BIS policy and press office discussed with the SLC Chief Executive a draft press notice that SLC wished to publish in response to the forthcoming figures. BIS advice was to delay this so that the figures were independent of policy comment and in order for the draft to be improved significantly. The SLC misinterpreted this as an instruction that the figures themselves needed to be delayed. Therefore when the figures appeared, the Deputy Chief Executive asked the SLC web team to take them down again. When the statistical teams in BIS and SLC realised this, an explanation was sought and the message communicated to the SLC Deputy Chief Executive that the figures needed to be reinstated. He was in a meeting but afterwards issued the instruction to put the figures back online.

### **3 Reactions and Impact**

As the breach only caused a delay of two and half hours there was no material impact. However, the breach has revealed a need for greater understanding of official statistics protocols within the SLC.

### **4 Corrective Actions Taken (include short-term actions, and long-term changes made to procedures)**

The removal of the figures was quickly spotted by the BIS and SLC statistics teams before ten o'clock and urgent investigation undertaken to establish what had happened. SLC were told that the figures had to be put back onto the website and they were reinstated at 12pm. In the longer term BIS and SLC statistical teams will take further steps to make sure the

National Statistics code is properly understand throughout the SLC. The BIS Head of Profession will brief SLC Executive Team on all aspects of the Code of Practice. SLC will tighten procedures to prevent non-statistical staff influencing the publication of official statistics by amending the website and ensuring that the statistical section is under the direct control of statistical staff.

**5 Any other relevant supporting material (including link to published statements about this breach)**

None