
Chair of the UK Statistics Authority, Sir Michael Scholar KCB

Phil Willis MP
Chair, Innovation Universities, Science and Skills Committee
House of Commons
London
SW1A 0AA

28 January 2009

Dear Mr Willis

**DEPARTMENT OF INNOVATION UNIVERSITIES AND SKILLS DEPARTMENTAL
REPORT 2008: THIRD REPORT OF SESSION 2008-09 (HC 51)**

I am writing in relation to the Committee's report on its inquiry into the 2008 Departmental Report of the Department of Innovation, Universities and Skills. I am grateful to the Committee for writing to the National Statistician to draw attention to the questions of the presentation of statistics mentioned at paragraph 21 of its report. She and I have considered this matter together and have agreed this response.

The Committee made two specific recommendations with respect to the use of statistics in the Departmental Report:

"We recommend that where a statistic is cited in the Departmental Report, the evidence to support the statistic be set out in full, if necessary in a footnote. We also recommend that in the material supporting the statistic DIUS provide information on the quality of data used, the source and the baseline and also provide a commentary on past performance [and]...

future departmental reports are reviewed before publication by either the UK Statistics Authority or by an independent person such as an academic statistician, whose opinion on the statistics is included in the report and that the appropriate metrics are specified in advance."¹

The Statistics Authority is happy to endorse the first recommendation relating to the presentation of statistics. We take the view that statistics used in a substantive way in major departmental documents (including Departmental Reports) should, as a matter of good practice, include the kind of information to which your report refers.

In the case of statistics published in *statistical* reports, it is a requirement of the Code of Practice for Official Statistics that that they should be presented with sufficient information on their quality and reliability in relation to the potential uses of the statistics and, where necessary, on methods, procedures and classifications. Commentary and analysis should aid interpretation, and provide factual information about the wider policy or operational context. Whilst that may be too demanding a standard to apply to statistics presented in the generality of departmental documents, all that information should nonetheless be readily

¹ House of Commons Innovation, Universities and Skills Committee *DIUS's Departmental Report 2008*, Third Report of Session 2008-09, 20 January 2009, HC 51, para 20-21, p. 14

available within each department and will thus facilitate the provision of the data about quality etc to which your report refers.

On the second recommendation, whilst the Statistics Authority is responsible for reviewing the way official statistics are published in statistical reports, our remit extends to doing this only after their publication. In this sense the Authority is not part of the approval process prior to the publication of statistics which is instead a matter for members of the Government Statistical Service and in particular, the statistical head of profession in each department under the guidance of the National Statistician.

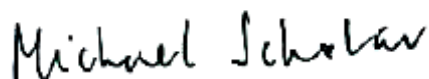
With that in mind, I think it would be anomalous for the Authority to be involved in assessing the use of statistics in Departmental Reports prior to publication. I would suggest that this role is in fact the responsibility of the relevant departmental head of profession for statistics who will have the added benefit of first-hand knowledge of the strengths and weaknesses of the statistics. He or she might be invited to prepare, and put their name to, a short statement on the use of statistics in the Departmental Report for inclusion as an annex to that report. In that role, they would have access to the advice and support of the National Statistician and her staff. The National Statistician will be writing about this to Permanent Secretary colleagues and to statistical heads of profession in departments.

My proposal here is consistent with, and builds on, the three principles relating to the use of official statistics by government set out in Sir Gus O'Donnell's letter of 16 January to the chair of the Public Administration Committee, a copy of which I enclose.

If this approach were to be followed but the Committee still had concerns about the use of statistics in such a report, the Statistics Authority would be happy to look into those concerns and submit a report.

In view of the possible application of this approach to all Departmental Reports, I am copying this letter to Sir Gus O'Donnell and to Ian Watmore at DIUS.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Michael Scholar". The signature is written in a cursive, slightly slanted style.

Sir Michael Scholar KCB