

# Assessment of compliance with the Code of Practice for Official Statistics

## Statistics on Further and Higher Education in Scotland

*(produced by the Scottish Further and Higher Education Funding  
Council)*

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### **About the UK Statistics Authority**

The UK Statistics Authority is an independent body operating at arm's length from government as a non-ministerial department, directly accountable to Parliament. It was established on 1 April 2008 by the *Statistics and Registration Service Act 2007*.

The Authority's overall objective is to promote and safeguard the production and publication of official statistics that serve the public good. It is also required to promote and safeguard the quality and comprehensiveness of official statistics, and good practice in relation to official statistics.

The Statistics Authority has two main functions:

1. oversight of the Office for National Statistics (ONS) – the executive office of the Authority;
2. independent scrutiny (monitoring and assessment) of all official statistics produced in the UK.

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# **Assessment of compliance with the Code of Practice for Official Statistics**

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## ASSESSMENT AND DESIGNATION

The *Statistics and Registration Service Act 2007* gives the UK Statistics Authority a statutory power to assess sets of statistics against the *Code of Practice for Official Statistics*. Assessment will determine whether it is appropriate for the statistics to be designated as National Statistics.

Designation as National Statistics means that the statistics comply with the *Code of Practice*. The *Code* is wide-ranging. Designation can be interpreted to mean that the statistics: meet identified user needs; are produced, managed and disseminated to high standards; and are explained well.

Designation as National Statistics should not be interpreted to mean that the statistics are always correct. For example, whilst the *Code* requires statistics to be produced to a level of accuracy that meets users' needs, it also recognises that errors can occur – in which case it requires them to be corrected and publicised.

Assessment reports will not normally comment further on a set of statistics, for example on their validity as social or economic measures. However, reports may point to such questions if the Authority believes that further research would be desirable.

Assessment reports typically provide an overview of any noteworthy features of the methods used to produce the statistics, and will highlight substantial concerns about quality. Assessment reports also describe aspects of the ways in which the producer addresses the 'sound methods and assured quality' principle of the *Code*, but do not themselves constitute a review of the methods used to produce the statistics. However the *Code* requires producers to "seek to achieve continuous improvement in statistical processes by, for example, undertaking regular reviews".

The Authority may grant designation on condition that the producer body takes steps, within a stated timeframe, to fully meet the *Code's* requirements. This is to avoid public confusion and does not reduce the obligation to comply with the *Code*.

The Authority grants designation on the basis of three main sources of information:

- i. factual evidence and assurances by senior statisticians in the producer body;
- ii. the views of users who we contact, or who contact us, and;
- iii. our own review activity.

Should further information come to light subsequently which changes the Authority's analysis, it may withdraw the Assessment report and revise it as necessary.

It is a statutory requirement on the producer body to ensure that it continues to produce the set of statistics designated as National Statistics in compliance with the *Code of Practice*.

# Contents

Section 1: Summary of findings

Section 2: Subject of the assessment

Section 3: Assessment findings

Annex 1: Suggestions for improvement

Annex 2: Compliance with Standards for Statistical Reports

Annex 3: Summary of assessment process and users' views

Annex 4: Summary of Requirements from Assessment Report 75

# 1 Summary of findings

## 1.1 Introduction

1.1.1 This is one of a series of reports<sup>1</sup> prepared under the provisions of the *Statistics and Registration Service Act 2007*<sup>2</sup>. The Act requires all statistics currently designated as National Statistics to be assessed against the *Code of Practice for Official Statistics*<sup>3</sup>. The report covers the following set of statistics, produced by the Scottish Further and Higher Education Funding Council, more commonly known as the Scottish Funding Council<sup>4</sup> (SFC):

- *Participation Rates for Entrants to Scottish Higher Education*<sup>5</sup> (*Participation Rates*); and
- *Higher Education Students and Qualifiers at Scottish Institutions*<sup>6</sup> (*HE Students and Qualifiers*).

1.1.2 These statistics were the subject of Assessment Report number 75, which was published in December 2010<sup>7</sup>. They have been re-assessed because responsibility for the production of the statistics transferred from the Scottish Government to the SFC, which has not previously been subject to assessment. This is discussed further in section 2 and Annex 4.

1.1.3 The Act allows an appropriate authority<sup>8</sup> to request an assessment of other official statistics in order for them to gain National Statistics status. In response to such a request, this report also covers the set of statistics reported in *College Performance Indicators*<sup>9</sup> (*College PIs*), produced by the SFC.

1.1.4 Section 3 of this report adopts an ‘exception reporting’ approach – it includes text only to support the Requirements made to strengthen compliance with the *Code* and Suggestions made to improve confidence in the production, management and dissemination of these statistics. This abbreviated style of report reflects the Head of Assessment’s consideration of aspects of risk and materiality<sup>10</sup>. The Assessment team nonetheless assessed compliance with all parts of the *Code of Practice* and has commented on all those where some remedial action is recommended.

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.statisticsauthority.gov.uk/assessment/assessment-reports/index.html>

<sup>2</sup> [http://www.opsi.gov.uk/Acts/acts2007/pdf/ukpga\\_20070018\\_en.pdf](http://www.opsi.gov.uk/Acts/acts2007/pdf/ukpga_20070018_en.pdf)

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.statisticsauthority.gov.uk/assessment/code-of-practice/index.html>

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.sfc.ac.uk/home/home.aspx>

<sup>5</sup> <http://www.sfc.ac.uk/statistics/Participation/participation.aspx>

<sup>6</sup> <http://www.sfc.ac.uk/statistics/PublishedStatistics/HEStudentsQualifiers1011.aspx>

<sup>7</sup> <http://www.statisticsauthority.gov.uk/assessment/assessment-reports/assessment-report-75---lifelong-learning-in-scotland.pdf>

<sup>8</sup> Subsection 12(7) of the Act defines ‘appropriate authority’ as Ministers of the Crown, Scottish Ministers, Welsh Ministers, Northern Ireland departments or the National Statistician

<sup>9</sup> <http://www.sfc.ac.uk/statistics/CollegePerformanceIndicators2011-12.aspx>

<sup>10</sup> <http://www.statisticsauthority.gov.uk/assessment/assessment-guidance-about-assessment/criteria-for-deciding-upon-the-format-of-an-assessment-report.pdf>

1.1.5 This report was prepared by the Authority's Assessment team, and approved by the Board of the Statistics Authority on the advice of the Head of Assessment.

## **1.2 Decision concerning designation as National Statistics**

1.2.1 The Statistics Authority judges that the statistics covered by this report are readily accessible, produced according to sound methods and managed impartially and objectively in the public interest, subject to any points for action in this report. The Statistics Authority confirms that the statistics listed in paragraph 1.1.1 are designated as National Statistics, and has determined that the statistics listed in paragraph 1.1.3 can be designated as new National Statistics products subject to the SFC implementing the enhancements listed in section 1.5 and reporting them to the Authority by September 2013.

1.2.2 The SFC has informed the Assessment team that it has started to implement the Requirements listed in section 1.5. The Statistics Authority welcomes this.

## **1.3 Summary of strengths and weaknesses**

1.3.1 The SFC engages with stakeholders through some user and steering groups, though these largely comprise representatives from providers of teaching and learning. The SFC intends to conduct a review of its range of statistics, though this has been on hold due to the post-16 education reforms<sup>11</sup>. Users value the statistics and they reported that their engagement with the SFC is productive and responsive.

1.3.2 The SFC provides effective guidance for those supplying the data that are used to produce the statistics. The SFC does not provide sufficient information to users about the strengths and limitations of the data.

1.3.3 The provision of data to the SFC creates little additional burden on suppliers and the data supply method includes a range of automated validation and checking processes. However, there is a considerable delay between the supply of data and the publication of the statistics.

## **1.4 Detailed recommendations**

1.4.1 The Assessment team identified some areas where it felt that the SFC could strengthen its compliance with the *Code*. Those which the Assessment team considers essential to enable designation as National Statistics are listed in section 1.5. Other suggestions, which would improve the statistics and the service provided to users but which are not formally required for their designation, are listed at annex 1.

## **1.5 Requirements for designation as National Statistics**

<b>Requirement 1</b>	Take steps to investigate and document users' needs and the use made of these statistics, publish
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<sup>11</sup> <http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Topics/Education/post16reform>

the relevant information and assumptions, and use them to better support the use of the statistics (para 3.1).

**Requirement 2**

Provide more information about the methods used to produce further and higher education statistics, and about the quality and reliability of them in relation to their use and potential use (para 3.3).

**Requirement 3**

Provide users with links or other appropriate signposting to equivalent statistics for other countries of the UK and publish information about any differences and reasons for the differences (para 3.4).

**Requirement 4**

Improve: (a) the explanation of the calculation of HEIPR; (b) the accompanying commentary and contextual information in all the reports, and (c) the consistency of the graphs and tables in *HE Students and Qualifiers* and *College PIs*, to aid user interpretation (para 3.5).

**Requirement 5**

Review the timetable for the production of *College PIs* and investigate whether these statistics can be published more quickly after the reference period (para 3.6).



## 2 Subject of the assessment

- 2.1 The SFC, a non-departmental public body of the Scottish Government, is the strategic body responsible for funding teaching and learning provision, research, and other activities in Scotland's 37 colleges, and 19 universities and higher education institutions (HEIs). The SFC replaced the separate Scottish Further and Higher Education Funding Councils (SFEFC and SHEFC) in 2005. One of the SFC's main activities is the collection, evaluation, and publication of relevant statistical data and other evidence about further and higher education in Scotland.
- 2.2 The SFC has a nominated lead official for the production of statistics who is responsible for ensuring compliance with the *Code of Practice for Official Statistics* and the *Pre-release Access to Official Statistics (Scotland) Order 2008*<sup>12</sup>. The lead official is accountable to the Scottish Government's Chief Statistician and receives additional support from the Scottish Government in meeting their responsibilities.
- 2.3 Responsibility for the production of *Age Participation Index*<sup>13</sup> (API), the predecessor to *Participation Rates for Entrants to Scottish Higher Education (Participation Rates)*, and *Higher Education Students and Qualifiers at Scottish Institutions (HE Students and Qualifiers)* transferred to the SFC from the Scottish Government during 2011. The SFC and one of its predecessors, SFEFC, have published *College Performance Indicators (College PIs)* since 2003.
- 2.4 *College PIs* is published annually each March with statistics up to the most recent complete academic year. The report presents statistics about the performance of the sector, such as enrolments, hours of learning, students completing course, success rates, and staff qualifications. PIs are broken down by subject groups, duration of study, age group and sex. The statistical report is accompanied by Excel spreadsheets, with charts, which supports further use by individual colleges.
- 2.5 *Participation Rates* was published for the first time in March 2012 for the 2010-11 academic year and is scheduled to be produced annually. *Participation Rates* now presents two measures of participation by initial entrants to higher education, domiciled in Scotland: the Higher Education Initial Participation Rate<sup>14</sup> (HEIPR) aged between 16 and 30 years of age; and the Young Participation Rate (YPR) based on participation by those aged between 16 and 19 years inclusive. These new measures aim to produce results which are more comparable with other countries, provide more accurate measurements, and include part-time study and study at the Open University, which were excluded from the old API. Rates are disaggregated by level of study (for example, first degree, HND/HNC and so on), institution type, deprivation group (as defined by the Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation<sup>15</sup>), local authority and

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<sup>12</sup> [http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ssi/2008/399/pdfs/ssi\\_20080399\\_en.pdf](http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ssi/2008/399/pdfs/ssi_20080399_en.pdf)

<sup>13</sup> <http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Topics/Statistics/Browse/Lifelong-learning/API0809>

<sup>14</sup> Participation is measured as a rate, dividing the number of initial entrants in a given age range by the population in that age range to give the rate of initial entry into HE. The National Records of Scotland (NRS – formerly the General Register Office for Scotland) produces mid-year population estimates, which are adjusted for use as the denominator in the calculation of HEIPR and YPR

<sup>15</sup> <http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Topics/Statistics/SIMD>

sex. The HEIPR for England is published in *Participation rates in higher education*<sup>16</sup> on the same day as the Scottish HEIPR.

- 2.6 *HE Students and Qualifiers* is published annually each March and presents statistics on the numbers of students in higher education in Scotland, new entrants, and on qualifiers from Scottish institutions. Breakdowns of the statistics are provided by the country of the student's permanent, or home, address prior to entry to the course, qualification level, institution type, disability, and deprivation group. The data used to produce *Participation Rates, HE Students and Qualifiers* and *College PIs* are collected by the Higher Education Statistics Agency<sup>17</sup> (HESA) from HEIs and by the SFC from Scottish FE colleges.
- 2.7 Users of the statistics include: Scottish Government; university and college umbrella organisations; local authorities; the media; academics and researchers; sector skills and students interest groups (such as the National Union of Students<sup>18</sup>, Scottish Youth Parliament<sup>19</sup>, and Edinburgh University Students' Association<sup>20</sup>); and those responsible for university admissions and clearing, and for further and higher education funding in other administrations. Interest in the participation statistics is focused particularly on performance in widening access to higher education from those in more deprived areas and from other under-represented groups. Colleges and HEIs use *College PIs* and *Students and Qualifiers* for benchmarking to assist College and HEI staff with responsibilities for quality assurance. The statistics are also used in external review by HM Inspectorate of Education<sup>21</sup> (now called Education Scotland) in the case of Colleges and the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education<sup>22</sup> in the case of HEIs, to inform evaluations of learner retention and attainment and to provide evidence of the impact of policies and strategies.
- 2.8 The SFC estimates that the staff resource required to produce these statistics is around one full-time equivalent (FTE) member of staff.

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<sup>16</sup> <https://www.gov.uk/government/organisations/department-for-business-innovation-skills/series/statistics-on-higher-education-initial-participation-rates>

<sup>17</sup> <http://www.hesa.ac.uk/>

<sup>18</sup> <http://www.nusconnect.org.uk/asset/News/33782/Unlocking-Scotlands-Potential.pdf>

<sup>19</sup> <http://www.syp.org.uk/>

<sup>20</sup> <http://www.eusa.ed.ac.uk/>

<sup>21</sup> <http://www.educationscotland.gov.uk/>

<sup>22</sup> <http://www.qaa.ac.uk/WorkWithUs/Pages/About-QAA.aspx>

### 3 Assessment findings

- 3.1 The SFC's statisticians formally engage with the users of, and data suppliers for, these statistics through user and steering groups. The membership of the user groups comes predominantly from the policy and supply-side of teaching and learning. Employers of graduates and business representatives are not represented on the statistics user groups, but attend other steering bodies<sup>23</sup> responsible for helping to review the needs for information about education, qualifications, training and skills in Scotland. The SFC publishes the proceedings of its steering groups<sup>24</sup> but has not documented the needs of users of the statistics. The SFC told the Assessment team that it intended to consult users about significant changes to its statistics in the autumn of 2012, but that it has postponed this until the completion of the reform of post-16 education. The SFC has not recently published any information about users' experiences of using these statistics. As part of the designation as National Statistics, the SFC should take steps to investigate and document users' needs and the use made of these statistics, publish the relevant information and assumptions, and use them to better support the use of the statistics<sup>25</sup> (Requirement 1). We suggest that the SFC refer to the types of use put forward in the Statistics Authority's Monitoring Brief, *The Use Made of Official Statistics*<sup>26</sup> when documenting use.
- 3.2 During the course of this assessment, the SFC published its revisions policy<sup>27</sup>, covering statistics which are subject to scheduled revisions and describing the SFC's approach to handling unscheduled revisions.
- 3.3 The SFC provides useful guidance to colleges<sup>28</sup> and HEIs about supplying the data that are used to produce these statistics. The SFC publishes summary information about methodological notes about data sources, coverage and definitions of terms<sup>29</sup> and includes some of this information within the statistical reports. However, the SFC has published insufficient information about the strengths and limitations of these statistics. For instance, *Participation Rates* measures initial participation, not participation of qualifiers alone. It is known that a proportion of students will not qualify so initial participation will be higher than participation by qualifiers alone. *College PIs* and *HE Students and Qualifiers* are better suited to providing information about qualifiers. The SFC does not provide users with sufficient information about the uncertainties in the data, such as participation rates for small areas. Important definitions are omitted, for example, 'Higher Education' and 'Age-adjustment'. Age cohorts presented in *Participation Rates* range from age 16 to 30 but participation in older age groups is not presented or explained in the report. As part of the designation as National Statistics, the SFC should provide more information

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<sup>23</sup> [http://www.sfc.ac.uk/aboutus/council\\_board\\_committees/council\\_committees/skills\\_committee/about\\_us\\_committees\\_skills.aspx](http://www.sfc.ac.uk/aboutus/council_board_committees/council_committees/skills_committee/about_us_committees_skills.aspx) and <http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Resource/0038/00389485.pdf>

<sup>24</sup> [http://www.sfc.ac.uk/statistics/SAGECommittee/sage\\_committee.aspx](http://www.sfc.ac.uk/statistics/SAGECommittee/sage_committee.aspx) and [http://www.sfc.ac.uk/statistics/IGSCommittee/IGS\\_committee.aspx](http://www.sfc.ac.uk/statistics/IGSCommittee/IGS_committee.aspx)

<sup>25</sup> In relation to Principle 1, Practices 2 and 5 of the *Code of Practice*

<sup>26</sup> <http://www.statisticsauthority.gov.uk/assessment/monitoring/monitoring-reviews/monitoring-brief-6-2010---the-use-made-of-official-statistics.pdf>

<sup>27</sup> <http://www.sfc.ac.uk/statistics/statistics.aspx>

<sup>28</sup> [http://www.sfc.ac.uk/guidance/SubmittingStatisticalInformation/FE\\_statistical\\_data/stats\\_fe\\_info.aspx](http://www.sfc.ac.uk/guidance/SubmittingStatisticalInformation/FE_statistical_data/stats_fe_info.aspx)

<sup>29</sup> <http://www.sfc.ac.uk/statistics/Participation/participation.aspx>

about the methods used to produce further and higher education statistics, and about the quality and reliability of them in relation to their use and potential use<sup>30</sup> (Requirement 2).

- 3.4 *Participation Rates* presents comparisons with similar statistics for England produced by the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills<sup>31</sup> (BIS). However, the report does not provide information about the comparability of these statistics with similar statistics for other countries in the UK. As part of the designation as National Statistics, the SFC should provide users with links or other appropriate signposting to equivalent statistics for other countries of the UK and publish information about any differences and reasons for the differences<sup>32</sup> (Requirement 3).
- 3.5 The key statistics presented in *Participation Rates* are the overall Scottish HEIPR and the YPR, which are calculated by summing the individual proportions of initial participants in higher education for each age cohort (such as 16 to 30 inclusive for HEIPR and 16-19 inclusive for YPR) to give an overall participation index. Each year's index therefore represents a mix of cohorts, and the SFC does not make clear in the statistical reports, and especially their titles, what the statistics measure or how they should be interpreted. The SFC told the Assessment team that the index is an estimate of the proportion of the population that will participate in higher education at some point between ages 16 and 30. The statistical reports include commentary outlining the main findings, but do not include any analysis to aid the interpretation of the statistics. The reports do not include explanations of trends, for instance, to explain why the proportion of people achieving 'good' degrees (2:1s and firsts) is increasing. *HE Students and Qualifiers* and *College PIs* adopt different formats for the presentation of graphs and tables which can obscure a clear understanding of the statistics. As part of the designation as National Statistics, the SFC should improve: (a) the explanation of the calculation of HEIPR; (b) the accompanying commentary and contextual information in all the reports; and (c) the consistency of the graphs and tables in *HE Students and Qualifiers* and *College PIs*, to aid user interpretation<sup>33</sup> (Requirement 4). We suggest that in meeting this requirement the SFC should consider the points detailed in annex 2.
- 3.6 The SFC receives data from colleges for *College PIs* at the end of October but does not publish the statistics until the following March. Among the proposed new arrangements, the SFC intends to consult users and suppliers about allowing individual colleges to publish their own data on their websites shortly after they send the data to the SFC. This would result in the disaggregated data the SFC uses to produce *College PIs* being released into the public domain significantly before the release of the aggregated statistics. The need for the statistics to be released more quickly must be balanced against the risk that the statistics would be used in debate about colleges' performance before *College PIs* had been published (which would include explanation and commentary about the statistics, and their quality, to help inform debate). As part of the

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<sup>30</sup> In relation to Principle 4, Practices 1 and 2 and Principle 8, Practice 1 of the *Code of Practice*

<sup>31</sup> Assessed in: <http://www.statisticsauthority.gov.uk/assessment/assessment-reports/assessment-report-77---higher-education-in-england-and-the-uk.pdf>

<sup>32</sup> In relation to Principle 4, Practice 6 of the *Code of Practice*

<sup>33</sup> In relation to Principle 8, Practice 2 of the *Code of Practice*

designation as National Statistics, the SFC should review the timetable for the production of *College PIs* and investigate whether these statistics can be published more quickly after the reference period<sup>34</sup> (Requirement 5).

- 3.7 The *Pre-release Access to Official Statistics (Scotland) Order* does not require the publication of a list of people who have access to official statistics in their final form, but it does say that a record must be kept, and made available on request. We suggest that the SFC publishes the job titles and organisation of those who have pre-release access to the statistics in their final form.
- 3.8 None of these reports currently carry the National Statistics logo and the designation as National Statistics of *HE Students and Qualifiers* and *Participation Rates* after assessment by the UK Statistics Authority (see paragraph 1.1.2) is not explained. We suggest that the SFC display the National Statistics logo on *HE Students and Qualifiers* and on *Participation Rates* with an explanation that these are designated National Statistics by virtue of having been assessed as part of the Scottish Government's Lifelong Learning statistics.

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<sup>34</sup> In relation to Protocol 2, Practice 1 of the *Code of Practice*

## Annex 1: Suggestions for improvement

A1.1 This annex includes some suggestions for improvement to *Participation Rates*, *College PIs* and *HE Students and Qualifiers* in the interest of the public good. These are not formally required for designation, but the Assessment team considers that their implementation will improve public confidence in the production, management and dissemination of official statistics.

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|---------------------|---|
| <b>Suggestion 1</b> | Refer to the types of use put forward in the Statistics Authority’s Monitoring Brief, <i>The Use Made of Official Statistics</i> when documenting use (para 3.1).   |
| <b>Suggestion 2</b> | Consider the points detailed in annex 2, in seeking to improve the statistical reports (para 3.5).  |
| <b>Suggestion 3</b> | Publish the job titles and organisation of those who have pre-release access to the statistics in their final form (para 3.7).  |
| <b>Suggestion 4</b> | Display the National Statistics logo on <i>HE Students and Qualifiers</i> and on <i>Participation Rates</i> with an explanation that these are designated National Statistics by virtue of having been assessed as part of the Scottish Government’s Lifelong Learning statistics (para 3.8). |

## Annex 2: Compliance with Standards for Statistical Reports

- A2.1 In November 2012, the Statistics Authority issued a statement on *Standards for Statistical Reports*<sup>35</sup>. While this is not part of the *Code of Practice for Official Statistics*, the Authority regards it as advice that will promote both understanding and compliance with the *Code*. In relation to the statistical reports associated with Scottish further and higher education statistics, this annex comments on compliance with the statement on standards.
- A2.2 In implementing any Requirements of this report (at paragraph 1.5) which relate to the content of statistical reports, we encourage the producer body to apply the standards as fully as possible.

### **Include an impartial narrative in plain English that draws out the main messages from the statistics**

- A2.3 Each of the statistical reports provides a summary of the main messages from the statistics in the introductions as well as details of the contents. The reports do not provide commentary which helps the user to understand what the figures show, or to offer possible explanations. Suitable comparisons over time and between areas within Scotland are given.
- A2.4 There are no references to published research which could provide further context for these statistics or references to other relevant statistics, such as for those about skills acquisition and apprenticeships. Numbers quoted in the reports are the main figures, although there are examples where these are not always suitably rounded such as ‘Colleges received £515,404,404 in teaching grants...’
- A2.5 The commentary and narrative in *Higher Education Students and Qualifiers* is separated from the tables, graphs and maps which could inhibit appropriate interpretation of the statistics. *Participation Rates* makes good use of graphs and tables. *College PIs* occasionally mismatches table references in the text to the actual tables containing the relevant statistics. The content of charts and graphs is not always obvious from the titles given, for example ‘Working age enrolments with a direct link to business (including percentage of working age population for all categories)’ in *College PIs*. Bars in bar charts are often not presented ordinally which would help them relate better to the text. Some colour choices display insufficient contrast and the meanings of shadings differ between graphs, vertical labelling can be difficult to read, and choices of scaling in some graphs emphasise changes and do not make for easy interpretation.

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<sup>35</sup> <http://www.statisticsauthority.gov.uk/news/standards-for-statistical-reports.html>

## **Include information about the context and likely uses of the statistics**

- A2.6 There is no explanation of the ways in which the statistics relate to the economy or to society and no information is provided about the policy or operational context. The context in which the statistics are produced has changed since the last reports were produced in 2012: the SFC now has outcome agreements in place with higher, and further education institutions and the statistics will reflect aspects of achievement, for instance widening access to higher education for those coming from deprived areas.
- A2.7 The reports do not consistently provide clear descriptions and explanations of concepts. *Participation Rates* does not clearly state that these statistics do not provide a measure of participation by qualifiers from Scottish institutions but is a measure of initial participation.
- A2.8 The reports and linked documents do not provide details about why these statistics are important, to whom, and for what they are known to be used for or the types of decisions made based on these statistics.

## **Include information about the strengths and limitations of the statistics in relation to their potential use**

- A2.9 There is no explanation of the extent of uncertainty in the statistics. The SFC told us that the statistics have never needed to be revised; however, we were also told that there are challenges in ensuring consistency in FE institutions in relation to variation in the ways the data are collected. The statistical reports do not include information about the nature and extent of revisions, nor why these are not required.
- A2.10 The statistical reports do not include sufficient information about the strengths and limitations of these statistics in relation to their potential uses. Strengths, such as the fact that each individual is counted only once in *Participation Rates*, are not brought out. Limitations are not sufficiently explained, for example, the effect of demographic and economic factors on changes over time, and the focus of the statistics on entries into education, rather than outcomes and completions.

## **Be professionally sound**

- A2.11 Descriptive statements are consistent with the statistics and professionally sound. As referred to above, not all the charts and tables in *HE Students and Qualifiers* and in *College PIs* conform to good practice, for instance colour choices are occasionally poor with insufficient contrast; vertical labelling is difficult to read; the meanings of shadings differ between graphs; and choices of scaling in some graphs emphasise changes and do not make for easy interpretation. Line plots are often bunched towards the bottom of charts as they represent breakdowns of totals shown in the same plot.



## **Include, or link to, appropriate metadata**

- A2.12 The coverage of the statistics presented in *HE Students and Qualifiers* and *College PIs* is clear from their titles. Both reports give the reference year for the latest statistics on their front cover. *Participation Rates* publishes the date of the report on the front cover but not the reference year for the statistics. All the reports specify the SFC as the producer body and give the name of the responsible statistician(s) as well as their contact details. The reports include methodological notes but some could be clearer about the definitions and the data sources. *HE Student and Qualifiers* includes a section called 'data sources' which describes the collection of the data but not the actual sources.
- A2.13 The SFC confirmed that there are no international standards for classifications or definitions which relate to these statistics.
- A2.14 Participation rates were re-calculated for previous years using the new participation measures of HEIPR and YPR to provide a consistent time series which assists with interpretation of the statistics.
- A2.15 The SFC does not always provide explanations of technical terms, for instance 'intercalated' in *Participation Rates* and 'writing –up students' in *HE Students and Qualifiers* and 'adjusted for leeway' in *College PIs*; no glossaries are provided to aid understanding of terms.

## **Annex 3: Summary of assessment process and users' views**

A3.1 This assessment was conducted from June 2012 to April 2013.

A3.2 The Assessment team – Iain Russell and Neil Wilson – agreed the scope of and timetable for this assessment with representatives of the SFC in June 2012. The Written Evidence for Assessment was provided on 7 January 2013. The Assessment team subsequently met the SFC during February to review compliance with the *Code of Practice*, taking account of the written evidence provided and other relevant sources of evidence.

### **Summary of users contacted, and issues raised**

A3.3 Part of the assessment process involves our consideration of the views of users. We approach some known and potential users of the set of statistics, and we invite comments via an open note on the Authority's website. This process is not a statistical survey, but it enables us to gain some insights about the extent to which the statistics meet users' needs and the extent to which users feel that the producers of those statistics engage with them. We are aware that responses from users may not be representative of wider views, and we take account of this in the way that we prepare Assessment reports.

A3.4 The Assessment team received 4 responses from the user consultation, including one respondent who was both a user and supplier. The respondents were grouped as follows:

Scottish Government	1
HE/FE providers	2
Media	1

A3.5 Users value the statistics highly and were positive about the way in which the SFC engages with them, being responsive to their queries and the SFC having an important role in producing and developing these statistics. One user noted the lack of good information for the sector on part-time students and that there could be better explanations of definitions and how they are used. The users had useful suggestions around how the publication of additional material and statistics could add value to the purposes they use them for.

### **Key documents/links provided**

Written Evidence for Assessment document

## Annex 4: Summary of Requirements from Assessment Report 75

A4.1 Two of the sets of statistics in this assessment, *Participation Rates* and *HE Students and Qualifiers*, were assessed in Assessment Report 75, published in December 2010<sup>36</sup>. They have been re-assessed because responsibility for the production of the statistics transferred from the Scottish Government to the SFC, who have not previously been subject to assessment. The content and methods of *Participation Rates* has also changed significantly since it was first assessed.

A4.2 Assessment Report 75 identified the following Requirements in relation to the statistics being re-assessed here:

**Requirement 2** Provide users with information about supplier organisations' methods for collecting and analysing the data it uses in the lifelong learning statistical publications.

**Requirement 3** Provide more information about the quality of the statistics, including relevance and accuracy.

**Requirement 4** Publish the quality guidelines used in managing the production of lifelong learning statistics.

**Requirement 5** Refer users to the relevant methodological notes and other appropriate metadata for the data tables.

**Requirement 6** Improve the presentation of the statistical publications to aid understanding and interpretability.

A4.3 The Statistics Authority confirmed the National Statistics designation of these statistics in a letter to the Scottish Government on 21 June 2012<sup>37</sup>. The letter stated: 'Those outputs for which responsibility has been transferred to the Scottish Funding Council will be the subject of a further assessment to determine whether they can continue to be designated as National Statistics.'

A4.4 Two Requirements within this report relate to aspects of *Code* compliance that resulted in Requirements in Assessment Report 75. These are:

**Requirement 2** Provide more information about the methods used to produce further and higher education statistics, and about the quality and reliability of them in relation to their use and potential use (para 3.3).

**Requirement 4** Improve: (a) the explanation of the calculation of HEIPR; (b) the accompanying commentary and contextual information in all the reports, and (c) the consistency of the graphs and tables in *HE Students*

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<sup>36</sup> See footnote 7

<sup>37</sup> <http://www.statisticsauthority.gov.uk/assessment/assessment-reports/confirmation-of-designation-letters/letter-of-confirmation-as-national-statistics---assessment-report-75.pdf>

*and Qualifiers and College PIs*, to aid user interpretation (para 3.5).

- A4.5 Requirement 3 in Assessment Report 75 resulted from a lack of information in the particular statistical reports about the relevance to users and the accuracy of the statistics. In meeting this Requirement, the Scottish Government published a Quality Note for Lifelong Learning (LL) statistics<sup>38</sup>. The Scottish Government also told us that when responsibility for the *Age Participation Index* was transferred to the SFC, the latter would lead on the publication of the equivalent information for those statistics. As noted in this report, SFC has changed the methods that it uses to produce the statistics in *Age Participation Index*, leading to the new *Participation Rates* statistics. SFC has not published equivalent information about the methods used to produce its statistics on further and higher education, nor any information about the quality of them, leading to Requirement 2 in this report.
- A4.6 Requirement 6 in Assessment Report 75 resulted from a lack of information about their importance and likely use of the statistics, the main messages being presented, and the operational context. In meeting this Requirement, the Scottish Government committed that, following the transfer of responsibility for the publication of *Participation Rates* and *HE Students and Qualifiers*, the SFC would review its existing and inherited publications to provide a more rationalised suite of statistical outputs on Lifelong Learning in Scotland. Improvements to the presentation of the statistical outputs would be considered as part of the development of the new suite of statistical outputs on Lifelong Learning. SFC told us that it had intended to consult users in autumn 2012 about proposals to significantly change its statistics, but has not done this, leading to Requirement 4 in this report.

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<sup>38</sup> <http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Topics/Statistics/Browse/Lifelong-learning/LLStatsQuality>

