

## 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)

Further Education (FE) Choices

<http://fechoices.skillsfundingagency.bis.gov.uk/Pages/home.aspx>

Name of Producer Organisation

Skills Funding Agency (SFA) in partnership with the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (BIS).

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

Siobhan Carey

Head of Profession for Statistics

BIS

[siobhan.carey@bis.gsi.gov.uk](mailto:siobhan.carey@bis.gsi.gov.uk)

020 7215 3276

12 March 2012

### 2. Circumstances of Breach

Relevant Principle/Protocol and Practice

Principle 2 Practice 7:

Correct errors discovered in statistical reports, and alert stakeholders, promptly

Date of occurrence

6 February 2012

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

Summary: FE Choices was published by the Skills Funding Agency (a BIS partner organisation) on 26 January 2012. It came to light on 21 February 2012 that some data had changed since the initial publication. A full investigation was undertaken and has identified that changes were made to some variables on 6 February 2012 in order to correct errors. These included a revision to the treatment of zero values and the inclusion of two questions that had been omitted due to a programming error. The headline values were not changed, and the corrections affected a small proportion of supporting data.

Following the investigation, the SFA have strengthened their change management procedures and put in place additional controls and sign-off procedures.

Detail: FE Choices data was published on 26 January 2012. A small amount of data in the Learner Satisfaction Indicator were subsequently corrected on 6 February 2012 without giving any warning or notification to users. This was reported by a former SFA contingent worker in a letter to John Hayes, the Minister for Further Education, Skills and Lifelong Learning, and copied to the National Statistician, received on 21 February 2012. The changes had not been previously reported within the SFA or BIS. The information was also communicated to the website *FE Week*. The Skills Funding Agency added a notice to their website alerting users to a potential problem on 21 February 2012. The text of this notice is provided below under Corrective Actions.

While investigating the reported change further changes that had been made to the data came to light. These were a revision to the treatment of zero values, correction of a coding error relating to questions 6 and 7, and the exclusion of data relating to large employers who train their own staff. These changes should also have been announced at the same time as the changes were implemented, and information made available about the nature of the changes.

Reasons for breach

Following feedback from users, the SFA decided to make a presentational change to the FE Choices data. Originally, providers' Learner Satisfaction scores were presented alongside the comparable national and organisation type average scores. Providers without a Learner Satisfaction score did not have this comparison information presented. Users requested that the comparison information was added to these providers. This was not new information, and was already available elsewhere on the site.

When the presentational change was made on 6 February 2012, additional revisions /corrections were made to the data at the same time. The letter sent to the Minister and National Statistician only relates to the Learner Satisfaction performance indicator.

The SFA has confirmed that some Learner Satisfaction data were changed, amounting to about 2,600 values, or 0.7%, out of nearly 372,000 unique values. This affected 442 providers, with 62 providers unaffected. The SFA have examined available email and other electronic records, and interviewed staff, but are unable to identify who made or authorised these changes, or uploaded the revised data file as around 45 staff had access to the site used to feed the updates to the external web manager..

The FE Choices data team had undergone a reorganisation and since April 2011 had come under the auspices of the Data Service within the SFA. This transition and incorporation on

to standard Data Service protocols is still in progress. A number of process failures have been identified relating to a lack of data backup procedures, failure to follow the required version control procedures, sign-off procedures which did not require statistician approval, and resourcing, including dependence on contingent workers and high levels of staff turnover during the reorganisation. All these issues are limited to the FE Choices system and processes, and do not extend to other SFA statistical outputs.

The other changes that were made to the data were:

- A revision to the treatment of zero values. In the initial release of the data zero was treated as a value when it should have been treated as not applicable or no response. The survey is conducted by a third party. The formatting of missing data as zero was not identified in the take on of the survey data.
- In the data released on 26 January 2012 the values for questions 2 and 7 were duplicates of other questions (1 and 6 respectively). This was a coding error and the 6 February 2012 release of the data corrected this programming error.
- Exclusion of data relating to large employers who train their own staff.

### 3. Reactions and Impact

A former contingent worker of the Skills Funding Agency reported the breach. We are not aware of any impact on users. The story was reported by the website *FE Week* and the *Times Education Supplement* (links below).

<http://www.feweek.co.uk/2012/02/24/sfa-to-be-investigated-for-alleged-data-cover-up/>

<http://www.tes.co.uk/article.aspx?storycode=6183034>

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

The Code of Practice was followed as soon as the change was notified to statistics staff in the Skills Funding Agency. This was also in line with the published [Revisions Policy](#), which states "It is our policy when handling revisions to statistical publications to be open and transparent with users about the need for revisions and how and when to expect revisions as part of our standard publication process." The SFA added a note to their website to warn users that there had been some changes, and that an investigation was taking place:

"It has been brought to our attention that some figures for the Learner Satisfaction indicator has changed since the original release on 26 January 2012. We are investigating this issue and will provide more information in due course."

This notice was subsequently updated to confirm the data now available is correct:

"It has been brought to our attention that some figures for the Learner Satisfaction indicator have changed since the original release on 26 January 2012. Users should be reassured that that data on this website are accurate and correct. We are investigating how this change occurred on 30 January 2012 and will provide more information in due course."

It was subsequently discovered that the data change had in fact occurred on 6 February 2012.

A further update will be published shortly attaching a note explaining exactly what data had changed.

Some other actions have already been taken:

- Improvement to the existing change control process to restrict the number of people able to upload web changes to the feeder site to 2;
- All changes will be approved by a GSS statistician;
- Tightening of the existing version control procedure to ensure that full records are kept of any changes or revisions, so that an audit trail exists;
- Strengthening of the backup policy for the FE Choices database to reduce business risk and ensure that full records are kept;
- There has already been some knowledge refreshment on the Code of Practice during the course of the investigation, however it is intended that more formal education will take place in the longer term.

In the longer term, in preparation for the 2012 FE Choices release, BIS and the SFA will be taking the following actions related to the FE Choices database and processes:

- Improved documentation of the production process;
- Additional checks and quality assurance;
- Bringing together the separate change logs for data development and the website under one combined log, and improving documentation of changes and approvals;
- Improved testing of code and data (user acceptance testing) by allowing more time, more automated testing, and adequate ring-fenced resources between web site and data projects;
- Ensure adequate (and sometimes additional) time on future release timetables to take account of any other factors which may impact on the ability to complete quality assurance,
- Although permanent staff within the SFA are aware of the Code of Practice, not all contingent workers are. A refresh of this knowledge is planned for both permanent staff and contingent workers, including a reminder of escalation routes, both statistical and organisational.

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

<http://fechoices.skillsfundingagency.bis.gov.uk/Pages/home.aspx>