
Ed Humpherson, Director General for Regulation

Jonathan Slater
Permanent Secretary
Department for Education
7th Floor Sanctuary Buildings
20 Great Smith Street
London
SW1P 3BT

11 November 2016

Dear Jonathan,

The UK Statistics Authority has received concerns following a Tweet published by the Department for Education (DfE) on 10 November¹. The Tweet read “70% of white working class boys from grammars go to uni vs 54% from comprehensives. What do you think about grammars”.

The UK Statistics Authority has reviewed the Tweet in question and identified possible issues with its content.

- The reference to ‘*working class boys*’ seems wrong. As was made clear in the answer to a Written Parliamentary Question from Royston Smith MP that was published on November 2², DfE does not collect ‘*information on pupils’ socio-economic status or whether they would be identified as working class*’³. Instead, the statistics quoted were about white male students who were eligible for free school meals in year 11.
- It is also in the nature of grammar schools that they are selective, unlike most comprehensive schools, and the tweet is therefore not making a like for like comparison between the two types of school.

The Authority has concluded that the tweet was not a fair representation of the underlying statistics⁴ and we are disappointed that the Department published it in this form. I was pleased therefore to see that your press office has now withdrawn this tweet, and did so quickly once the issue was identified.

I know that the Department’s statistical Head of Profession, Iain Bell, has been working closely with your press office to seek to ensure that all statistical content is checked with his

¹ This Tweet has now been withdrawn.

² <http://www.parliament.uk/business/publications/written-questions-answers-statements/written-question/Commons/2016-10-19/49388/>

³ See footnote 2.

⁴ See footnote 2.

team before publishing. This approach to sign-off is encouraged by the Code of Practice for Official Statistics⁵.

I understand that in this case the statistical team was not consulted before the message was tweeted, which was unfortunate. I would therefore like to ask for an update from you on how you will avoid the recurrence of such misleading communications.

I am copying this letter to John Pullinger, National Statistician, and Iain Bell, Head of Profession for Statistics at the Department.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Ed Humpherson', written in a cursive style.

Ed Humpherson

⁵ <https://www.statisticsauthority.gov.uk/monitoring-and-assessment/code-of-practice/>