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Report on Consultation on ceasing publication of Students Eligible for Funding



Report on Consultation on ceasing publication of Students Eligible for Funding

Issue Date: 7 October 2024

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Summary: This document confirms plans following a consultation to seek views on our proposal to cease publication of the Students Eligible for Funding statistical publication.

FAO: Principals / Chairs / Finance Directors / Strategic Planning in Scotland's universities, and the general public.

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Future of Students Eligible for Funding publication

Introduction

1. This document confirms our plans for the Students Eligible for Funding publication, following a public consultation. We received comments from stakeholders during the consultation period 5 August 2024 to 2 September 2024.

Changes to be implemented from 2023-24 data onwards

2. The following table summarises the changes we will make immediately to the publication:

Changes to be implemented

1) We will cease publication of the Students Eligible for Funding statistical publication with immediate effect, cancelling the publication of the 2023-24 statistics.

2) The statistics will be shared annually with the sector, Scottish Government and Scottish Parliament Information Centre (SPICe) as management information.

3) The statistics will be available on request to other interested parties.

About the consultation

3. This was a public consultation in which stakeholders were invited to share their feedback on the proposal to cease publication.
4. Respondents from universities were also invited to share their feedback on a further three questions related to their use of the published statistics and the proposed alternate management information provision.
5. All responses were received via the online form provided on the SFC website.
6. We have reviewed the responses we received to the consultation – a statistical analysis was not necessary because of the small numbers of responses. This document provides a summary of the responses received and confirms the decisions made by SFC about the future publication of the statistics.

Responses to the consultation

Summary of responses and general feedback received

7. Ten responses to the consultation were received, of which six were from universities, two from colleges and two from sector stakeholders.
8. It is important to note that two of the respondents were from colleges, who both argued that it is not a publication they use often, and that the data does not have a specific purpose for them. One described the publication as 'irrelevant.'

Feedback on the proposal to cease publication

9. All respondents answered this question. Of the ten respondents:
 - Five agreed, of which two were universities.
 - Four disagreed, of which three were universities.
 - One respondent was unsure, which was a university.
10. For those respondents who agreed with the proposal, concerns about the forecasting element of the publication and the potential for this information to be misinterpreted by third parties was cited as a primary reason.
11. However, those respondents who indicated their agreement to cease publication highlighted that they would wish to continue to receive the information. This included QAA who requested to be included in any future circulation of data.
12. Respondents described this information as: "essential to universities" and it was considered to help respondents understand the overall use of funding. They considered that, although there were concerns about the forecasting it did provide a good sense of overall trends. Several themes emerged in the reasons for disagreement including:
 - The timing of the release of this data.
 - That this information would not be publicly available and the importance of transparency, particularly in relation to government spending.
 - If this data was only available to those outwith the sector via FOI this could lack the necessary context.
13. That these statistics are published earlier than HESA data was cited as a major advantage of the publication. The timeliness of the data, enabling respondents to see the emerging picture earlier than if they were solely reliant on HESA data was cited as a reason to continue publishing the Students Eligible for Funding statistical publication.
14. Concerns were expressed that aggregated data on students eligible for SFC funding was not publicly available elsewhere. The need for transparency regarding government spending and public finances was also referenced as a reason to continue with the

publication. That information such as that contained in the publication is important to help inform the public discourse around Scottish Higher education was also cited as a reason not to cease publication.

15. It was also considered that information provided under FOI might not have the appropriate contextualisation of the data which is provided by SFC in the publication. The importance of providing impartial information was cited.
16. The Scottish Parliament Information Centre (SPICe) highlighted the importance of the publication in assisting its work responding to MSPs' enquiries and informing Committee work and the frequency with which they use the data. Citing the tight deadlines to which SPICe work they would hope to have continued access to the data without having to make specific requests of SFC.
17. There has not been a definitive sector response as to SFC's proposal to cease publication of the Students Eligible for Funding publication. It should also be noted that there are 19 higher education institutions in Scotland, of which only six responded to the consultation. We have taken this into account in reflecting on the feedback, and identifying suitable mitigations for the concerns expressed:
 - We are already in discussions with QAA about provision of data through ongoing discussions relating to Scotland's Tertiary Quality Enhancement Framework (TQEF) and the Self-Evaluation Action Plan (SEAP).
 - While we recognise that there is public interest in information on publicly funded students, we note that some respondents share our previously stated concerns about the publication of forecast figures. We have therefore decided to proceed with ceasing publication of the Students Eligible for Funding publication. We will review appropriate ways to publicise data on publicly funded students, with suitable contextual information.
 - Information that was previously published as part of the Students Eligible for Funding report will be provided as management information to the sector, Scottish Government and SPICe. We will also look to disaggregate the data further for specific stakeholder groups, as requested in responses to the consultation.

Feedback on university usage of students eligible for funding data

Use for internal operational or monitoring purposes

18. The majority of respondents described using the publication to help them gain a general understanding of the sector, to ascertain how funded places had been used, and to observe trends. Using this information to compare performance against other institutions was referenced frequently. That this information was provided earlier than that from HESA was also considered a positive.
19. References were made to the publication supporting internal conversations around

funded places and informing institutional decision-making. It was also used to assist in discussions with SFC.

20. One institution stated that due to the lack of granularity in the publication they used other sources to monitor and understand what was happening with new entrants and continuing students.
21. One institution noted that it found SFC's narrative analysis and insights on the sectoral position particularly valuable.

Ways to provide management information to the sector that differ from the published statistics

22. Respondents asked for the management information to use more granular data collected in the return than have been presented in the publication, for example by level and type of study (including Graduate Apprenticeships), as well as domicile.
23. It was also considered that it would be beneficial to understand the success measures and the relationship between these and colleges outcomes and progression.
24. Given the concerns that have been expressed about forecasting, respondents suggested that user warnings about responsible use of this data should be given as and when providing the data. This was considered particularly important due to the divergence from HESA returns due to different definitions of Full-time Equivalent (FTE) being used. A desire for the continued use of FTE as the unit of measurement was expressed.
25. Similarly, including clarification on technical definitions, with notes on any deviations, in management information was requested.
26. Noting that the data currently is provided in a table in a PDF document, there were requests for either use of Excel or other interactive methods which allowed for filtering.
27. The ability for institutions to continue to be able to compare their performance against the rest of the sector was considered important, and that there ought to be a mechanism for this within the management information.
28. Questions were asked as to whether the management information could be provided earlier than September and whether distribution would be automatic.

Implementation of the changes

29. With consideration given to the feedback provided to the consultation, we have determined to take the following approach:

- A 2023-24 update of the Students Eligible for Funding publication was not released on 17 September 2024, as scheduled and there will be no further releases of the Students Eligible for Funding publication.
- Information that was previously published as part of the Students Eligible for Funding report will be provided as management information to the sector, Scottish Government and SPICe. We will also consider greater disaggregation of the data provided to the sector.
- Provision of data to QAA will be handled through ongoing discussions relating to Scotland's Tertiary Quality Enhancement Framework (TQEF) and the Self-Evaluation Action Plan (SEAP).
- SFC will review the options for alternate provision of public data on the number of delivered funded places.