

## **RESPONSE TO CONSULTATION ON STATISTICS THAT MEASURE THE PROGRESS OF CHILDREN FROM DISADVANTAGED BACKGROUNDS TO HIGHER EDUCATION**

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We welcome the Government's consultation on these issues and endorse the move towards more robust measures of the socio-economic gap in pupil achievement.

Where we have a view, we have responded to the specific questions posed in the consultation as below.

***Q1 - Do you agree that the data quality issues with the FYPSEC measure are sufficient to exclude it from the August 2011 publication and subsequent releases?***

To identify the socio-economic gap in pupil achievement we need a measure of the long term socio-economic disadvantage experienced by a pupil. Ideally we would want to distinguish differing levels of socio-economic disadvantage, not just acute disadvantage.

We agree that the data source for the FYPSEC measure is not robust enough to justify the continued inclusion of this measure. However, the FSM measure that is proposed to replace FYPSEC only has the potential to identify (approximately) the bottom 15% of the socio-economic distribution at a particular point in time. It does not provide the means to identify individuals who have a lesser but still considerable level of socio-economic disadvantage (e.g. the bottom 40% of the distribution).

Further, research has suggested that the FSM measure is problematic in that a) it misses some individuals with low income for various reasons, including parents not claiming FSM and b) it includes some who have higher income (see Hobbs and Vignoles (2009) 'Is children's free school meal 'eligibility' a good proxy for family income?', *British Educational Research Journal*, vol. 36, no. 4, pp.1469-3518).

That said the proposed FSM data is more robust than FYPSEC since it is derived from school administrative data rather than student responses (though it does still depend on parent reporting to the school that they are eligible for state benefits such as IS or Job Seekers Allowance).

Hence we would not oppose the use of the FSM measure but it most certainly does have major limitations. We would argue that the ideal would be to develop administrative data records to the point that the education of the parent could be known. Parental education level could then be used as a longer term indicator of socio-economic advantage/ disadvantage. It would also enable us to identify differing levels of disadvantage, rather than just acute disadvantage. Until we are able to use administrative data to identify the education level of parents, asking parents about their highest level of education should be seriously considered as an alternative approach. Further, it is essential that the government continues to collect survey data that is sufficiently rich, in terms of measuring parental education and socio-economic status, that we can examine the socio-economic gap in HE participation in a robust way. At the moment the Longitudinal Study of Young People (LSYPE) enables researchers to do just this. The Millennium Cohort Study will also enable us shortly to do this for those born at the turn of the century. Ensuring that we continue to collect data of this nature is a priority.

Work based on the LSYPE suggests that a simple linear combination of whether a child is eligible for FSM, the IDACI score (percentage of families in their neighbourhood who are receiving state support (based on Super Output Area)) and ACORN group (based on postcode) would provide a much better proxy of socio-economic disadvantage. All of these measures are available in administrative data and would enable you to split socio-economic advantage into quartiles and/or

quintiles. In the near future, *Understanding Society* will be linked to school administrative data, which means that a more robust measure of socio-economic disadvantage based purely on administrative data could be updated at regular intervals using robust measures of socio-economic status available in that data and the entire population of children in full-time education.

If the FSM measure is adopted we need to be clearer about one of its major properties, namely that during economic downturns the incidence of FSM rises. At the moment the advantage of switching to the FSM measure is that one might expect some narrowing of the HE participation gap over the next few years. This is because as unemployment rises (as many think likely) then individuals will temporarily appear as being in receipt of FSM even though their underlying socio-economic disadvantage is not serious. These young people will tend to have a higher HE participation rate than those in receipt of FSM over a long period or during a boom period.

***Q2 - Are there any improvements to the FSM measure (Annex B) that you would wish to suggest?***

We have noted our concerns about the limitations of the FSM measure. In particular, a cross section measure (at age 15) of whether a pupil was eligible for free school meals gives only a partial view of whether a pupil suffers from long term socio-economic disadvantage. It is certainly a poor indicator if we are most interested in measuring the bottom 40% of the socio-economic status distribution. There are ways we could use FSM more effectively as an indicator however. It would be better to use repeated measures over time of whether the person is eligible for FSM. For example, one could create an “ever entitled to FSM” indicator or an “ever entitled to FSM during secondary school” indicator. Another alternative is a measure “spent 2 or more years eligible for FSM during primary and/or secondary school” (Of course, these measures may be problematic for the first few cohorts of students, for whom we will not have access to all of this information. We still believe it is worth

considering in the longer term though.) If this is not possible, we would at least urge the Government to undertake robustness checks as to whether the estimates of socio-economic gaps in pupil achievement are sensitive to measuring FSM receipt over a number of years as opposed to just age 15.

Another additional indicator for the child is whether their school has a high FSM rate. For children who are not themselves FSM, measuring the FSM rate of pupils in their school provides some information about their socio-economic status, whereas the fact that they are not eligible for FSM is not informative.

Finally, estimates based on the LSYPE shows that we can come up with a good estimate of a child's families' permanent income using a linear combination of their free-school meal status, their idaci score (based on the super output area they live in) and acorn group (based on their post-code). This could be updated annually using data from *Understanding Society* in the very near future.

***Q3 - Does the standard table for Social Mobility metric 2 (Annex C) provide an adequate summary of the progress made in widening participation to the most selective institutions? Anything else that you feel could be included?***

We welcome the publication of the metrics of a) HE participation by FSM status and b) HE participation at more selective institutions by FSM status. The government must be aware that it may be a dynamic measure i.e. that in a given year it will include a different set of higher education institutions, depending on the mean A level grades of their intake that year. This is a problem and at a minimum it is important this is recognised up front. Ideally one would want to agree a set of institutions that would be defined as "most selective" and to keep this group constant perhaps in line with the REF cycle.

Note that our concerns with the FSM measure apply here too. A cross section measure (at age 15) of whether a pupil was eligible for free school meals gives only

a partial view of whether a pupil suffers from long term socio-economic disadvantage. It is certainly a poor indicator if we are most interested in measuring the bottom 40% of the socio-economic status distribution. We have suggested under point 2 above ways we could use FSM more effectively as an indicator.

***4 - Are there any additional series or breakdowns that you would like to see included in the August Release?***

Whilst the data being provided at Local Authority level is a welcome move, we would urge that these data on HE participation rates are routinely published at school level. The Sutton Trust recently published similar data at school level based on UCAS information. It would be preferable to have these data from the linked school administrative data set to avoid over reliance on partial UCAS data. Further, data on the HE participation rate and the participation rate at selective institutions would need to be combined with measures such as the proportion of students in the school eligible for free school meals. Whilst an imperfect measure of the socio-economic disadvantage of pupils in that school, at least it will enable us to compare schools that are more similar to one another in terms of pupil intake.

***Q7 - Would a map showing FSM progression rates by region be useful?***

Yes but alongside indicators of the incidence of FSM by region.

***Q8 - Should the local authority statistics show changes from the previous year?***

Yes this is essential to monitor change.

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