

Sir Alan Langlands
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Dear Sir Alan

I am writing to you following today's publication of the HESA Performance Indicators for 2007/08. They raise important questions on which I would welcome your advice.

The Performance Indicators show welcome overall increases in the proportion of young entrants to higher education from state schools (to 87.4%). However, whilst the number of entrants from lower socio-economic classes has increased, as a proportion this group has disappointingly dropped by 0.4 percentage points to 29.4%. The retention indicators also give mixed messages, with the lowest ever figure (13.4%) for the proportion of students projected to neither obtain an award nor transfer to another institution, but also an increasing proportion of young and mature first degree entrants not continuing after their first year; and of course there are significant differences between individual institutions.

HEFCE's long-standing interest in this area is shown by its work in supporting the Performance Indicators (PIs), and in convening the UK-wide PI Steering Group. Retention and progression are important elements of assessing the way in which an institution supports its students and helps them to succeed. Last year's National Audit Office and Public Accounts Committee reports both highlighted the need for institutions to review the support which they give to students, and included many examples of good practice. I know that your institutional teams, as part of their regular dialogue with institutions, encourage those with poor relative progression rates to examine why and to put in place strategies to improve them.

Accordingly, I would welcome your views on what may be causing the changes, both welcome and less welcome, in the 2007/08 Performance Indicators; on differences between different types of institution; and any advice you would offer on further action that might be taken. For example, the "Group of 11" initiative, announced in the New Opportunities White Paper, offers a new model for how a self-selecting group of universities can work together.

Specifically, I think it would be helpful to stimulate a better public understanding, and a more informed public debate, on retention rates between institutions. The wide differences here concern me. No doubt there will be a number of factors to explain why certain institutions have particularly low retention rates. However, it seems likely that the quality of teaching and the student experience will be an important component. For this reason, I think there could be role here for the QAA.

As you know from my comments to the IUSS Select Committee on 11 May, I want to see the QAA take a more proactive and public-facing role in communicating the quality of HE and explaining to the public, in plain English, how quality and standards are maintained. This might be helped if the QAA provided comment on institutions' retention rates within their institutional audits. I know that your Quality sub-committee, chaired by Colin Riordan, has already, as part of its work, looked at the possible future role of the QAA and the next audit cycle. This could be a good opportunity to consider what part the QAA could play in creating greater visibility and a better understanding of retention rates and variations between institutions. Progression rates are of course available for the public to see on the Unistats website but I think that potential students and their advisers are not as aware as they might be about Unistats, and the information it contains.

I would be grateful for your advice on these important areas of policy.

JOHN DENHAM