

Office for Fair Access: Guide to institutions' self-assessments and commentaries for monitoring

What are the self-assessments and commentaries?

Universities and colleges set targets and milestones for themselves in their access agreements. These targets must be agreed with OFFA, although OFFA does not itself set any targets.

As part of our monitoring process for access agreements we asked universities and colleges to:

- assess their progress against each target they set themselves in their access agreements
- provide data showing their progress against targets for each academic year for the past five years
- provide a commentary setting their access work in context, highlighting any particular challenges they had faced, and, if they had not made as much progress as wished, explaining the reasons for this.

The tables shown in each institution's self-assessment reproduce the information we received from the institution as part of its monitoring return. Therefore the tables reflect institutions' own analysis of their performance, not OFFA's.

What is OFFA doing with the self-assessments and commentaries?

The self-assessments and commentaries help us to judge how well universities and colleges are meeting their access challenges. They also help to inform our continual dialogue with individual institutions and the sector as a whole, about what works best to widen access and improve retention and student success.

Guide to Table 1

Table 1 is split into two parts. Table 1a shows the progress made by the institution against the statistical targets/milestones it set itself in its access agreement relating to the institution's applicants, entrants or student body. Institutions often use their own internal data when setting such targets, but most institutions also use data from the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA), Ucas, or another source.

Table 1b shows the other milestones and targets that the institution chose to include, relating to outreach, lifelong learning, or institutional management and mission. For example, these might relate to the number of schools an institution is aiming to work with, or the number of students involved in outreach activities. The table also includes information on the measurable success of those activities, for example in how well an institution's work with schools has increased aspiration and attainment, influenced choices around GCSE subject, or increased the number of young people considering whether to enter higher education, or where to study.

In some cases data may not be given for a particular year because it was not available at the time the institution filled in the monitoring return. These instances are marked 'N/A' in the table or left blank.

Looking at each of the columns in Table 1, the following information is shown:

Table 1a

Milestone/target type: The entries in this column describe the category the milestone/target fits into. Some institutions, for example, may have chosen a target that relates to 'NS-SEC (HESA Table T1a)'. This is the figure reported by HESA showing what percentage of the institution's students are from National Statistics Socio-Economic Classifications (NS-SEC) 4-7.¹

Description: This column gives a more detailed description of the milestone/target. Here, for example, the institution may explain that its target is that '20 per cent of young entrants from the UK should be from NS-SEC groups 4-7 by a specified academic year'.

Baseline data: This is the starting point against which the institution is measuring its progress. It may be a whole number, a percentage, or a percentage expressed as a decimal.

Baseline year: This is the academic year in which the baseline data was measured. If only a single year is given this will be the first year of the two calendar years in which the academic year falls, e.g. '2006' represents 2006-07.

Target: What the institution is aiming to achieve. For example, the institution may have set itself a target to achieve '22 per cent young UK entrants from NS-SEC groups 4-7'.

Target year: The academic year by when the institution aims to achieve its target. If only a single year is given this will be the first year of the two calendar years in which the academic year falls, e.g. '2014' would represent 2014-15.

Progress to date: Data for each academic year for the past five years. Likely to be expressed in the same format as the baseline data in Column 3.

Performance summary: The institution's assessment of its own performance. The entries in this column were selected by the institution from a list of pre-determined categories. For example, an institution may have chosen 'No progress made against baseline data' because the data for the year being monitored is the same as that for the baseline year. The 'Progress to date' columns provide a more detailed picture, where you can see what progress may have been made against the target in previous years. This shows why it is important to look at performance over time rather than focus on the change in a single year. Institutions also provide some context about certain targets in their institutional commentary (Table 3, see below).

Table 1b

Table 1b uses the same headings, but these targets relate to outreach activity and outcomes. For example, an institution may have a target to increase its partnerships with schools and colleges by a specified year. Its performance summary shows whether it is on course to meet this target.

Targets around outreach activity and outcomes demonstrate the efforts and successes of institutions to raise aspirations and attainment levels well before application and entry to higher education. Much of this work benefits the sector generally and is not of sole benefit to the institution providing the activity. This work is critical to widening participation and fair access.

¹ Further information on the definition of NS-SEC is available on the HESA website at <http://www.hesa.ac.uk/content/view/2379/#nssec>

Guide to Table 2

Table 2 gives a reminder of the institution's progress against three HESA widening participation performance indicators. This data is not OFFA data and it is not new; it has been available from HESA for some time at www.hesa.ac.uk/pi.

The performance indicators give information about the participation of certain groups that are under-represented in higher education, relative to the HE population as a whole. Table 2 also has a line showing whether the university is above or below its location-adjusted benchmark. This line includes a '+' or '-' marker to establish how well the HEI is performing in the higher education sector. If there is no significant divergence, this line will be blank². It is important to note that benchmarks change each year and, because they are averages, there will always be some institutions that are below the benchmark and some that are above it. Benchmarks are not targets. They enable comparisons to be made between institutions which are sufficiently alike to be compared (for example, they take account of the entry qualifications of students, the subjects they study, and the students' age.)

For more information on HESA performance indicators and benchmarking, see www.hesa.ac.uk/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=2074&Itemid=141

The indicators used are for young (that is, aged up to 20 when they start their course) full-time students only and show:

- **State School (%):** The percentage of students who attended a school or college in the state sector.
- **NS-SEC 4-7 [socio-economic class] (%):** The percentage of students from categories 4 to 7 of the National Statistics Socio-Economic Classification. Note that for 2008-09 only, UCAS changed the question that informs NS-SEC. As a result, the NS-SEC data for 2008-09 is not comparable with that published prior to and post 2008-09; this is why the tables are greyed out for this year.
- **Low participation neighbourhoods (young) (%):** The percentage of students who come from a neighbourhood in which there is low participation in higher education.

In the self-assessments for 2011-12, performance indicators for 2010-11 are used because the 2011-12 performance indicators had not been published at the time universities and colleges filled in their monitoring returns.

For further education colleges, no data appears in Table 2. This is because only one year of data has been published so trend data is not yet available.

Guide to Table 3

Table 3 gives the institution's commentary on the data it has reported. This allows the institution to put the raw data into context and to give more details. In this table we asked institutions to

² The indicator is classed as significantly different from the benchmark, when it meets two criteria: the difference between the indicator and benchmark percentages is greater than three per cent; and where the difference between the indicator and benchmark percentages is greater than three times the standard deviation of the indicator. Therefore if the indicator is significantly lower than the benchmark, it is classed as '-', and if it is significantly higher, it is classed as '+'.

comment on the level of progress made against targets; set the figures in context (for example, say whether there were any external factors to explain certain figures); provide explanations where targets have not been met or progress has been less than anticipated; and comment on key factors that have led to successful outcomes.