

# Statistical notice: Office for Students' Statistical Policy Statement on Revisions

April 2019

## Introduction

1. As a producer of official statistics, the Office for Students (OfS) is committed to the principles and practices set out in the Code of Practice for Statistics<sup>1</sup> when producing and releasing statistics. By following the Code of Practice we are able to ensure that all of the statistics we produce are of public value, are high quality and can be trusted.
2. Occasionally it may be necessary to make revisions to our data and published statistics in order to update or correct data. These revisions may be planned amendments to published statistics to improve quality, incorporating additional data that was unavailable at the point of initial publication, or making planned changes to methodology to improve accuracy and measurement. The Code of Practice refers to these as scheduled revisions. Revisions may also be unplanned amendments to published statistics in response to the identification of errors in data or process following their initial publication. The Code of Practice refers to these as unscheduled corrections.
3. The Code of Practice includes a number of principles and practices which producers of official statistics must comply with when making scheduled revisions or unscheduled corrections to official statistics and data. This statistical policy statement on revisions sets out how we will comply with the Code of Practice. Unless specifically stated, our use of the term revisions within this policy statement covers both scheduled revisions and unscheduled corrections.

## Code of Practice for Statistics

4. There are three key references to revisions within the Code of Practice for Statistics:
  - a. **Principle T3: Orderly release, practice 9** – requires producers of official statistics to release scheduled revisions or unscheduled corrections to the statistics and data as soon as practicable. Any changes should be handled transparently, in line with a published policy.
  - b. **Principle Q2: Sound methods, practice 5** – requires producers of official statistics to provide users with advance notice about changes to methods, explaining why the changes are being made.
  - c. **Principle Q3: Assured quality, practice 4** – requires producers of official statistics to explain any scheduled revisions, or unscheduled corrections that result from errors, alongside the statistics, being clear on the scale, nature, cause and impact.
5. The full Code of Practice is available on the [UK Statistics Authority website](https://www.statisticsauthority.gov.uk/code-of-practice/).

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<sup>1</sup> Code of Practice for Statistics: Ensuring official statistics serve the public (February 2018) UK Statistics Authority and Office for Statistics Regulation – available at: <https://www.statisticsauthority.gov.uk/code-of-practice/>

## Policy summary

6. Our policy on managing revisions to our data and statistical publications is to be open and transparent with users about:
  - the need for revisions – including the scale, nature, cause and impact
  - how and when to expect standard, scheduled revisions
  - the process for communicating and publishing other revisions.
7. We will clearly explain the reason for any scheduled revisions or unscheduled corrections to ensure that our users understand the scale, nature, cause and impact of the changes.
8. We will usually communicate scheduled revisions to official statistics in advance through the statistics release schedule on the [OfS website](#) and will explain the impact of revisions when the revised and final data is released. However, some of our processes require specific approaches to revisions, particularly where data is dynamic and amendments occur on a regular and rolling basis, for example Unistats. In these cases, we will clearly document our approach to revisions and reference this in the relevant statistical publication.
9. We will announce any major planned changes to data collection, release of revised data, or statistical methodology in advance. Where unscheduled corrections result in material changes to statistics and data, we will update the data as soon as possible and notify users of the change through our website to ensure that our users understand the scale, nature, cause and impact of the changes.

## Why we make revisions

10. The [OfS data strategy 2018-2021](#) sets out how we will use data to support our regulatory responsibilities, and describes our high-level approach to collecting and managing data. As an evidence based regulator we use data and information to inform our effective, efficient and intelligent regulation in the student interest. It is important, therefore, that the data we use is fit for purpose.
11. As a producer of official statistics it is important that the data and the statistics that we produce command public confidence by being robust, of high-quality and sound methodology. Occasionally we may need to make revisions to some of our data and statistics to ensure that they remain accurate and reliable.

## How we decide whether to make revisions

12. We aim to avoid the need for revisions to statistical publications unless they are absolutely necessary or planned. We have quality assurance systems and processes in place to minimise the number and scale of revisions.
13. The Head of Profession will use their professional judgement to determine whether the impact of the revision is sufficient to merit publishing the amendment. If the original data or statistical publication is misleading, we will ensure that revisions are made promptly and users and potential users are alerted to the revisions as soon as possible.

14. Publishing multiple, subtly different versions of the same data is likely to cause confusion. If the Head of Profession deems the impact of the revision to be negligible, it may be insufficient to merit publishing an amendment. Where data or a statistical publication is scheduled to be updated and re-released, any minor revisions will be incorporated at this point.

## **Scheduled revisions**

15. There are three main reasons for making scheduled revisions to our statistical publications:

- a. Methodology changes – planned changes in how we collect information, or changes in statistical methodology to improve accuracy and measurement, or changes in definitions of categories.
- b. Planned data changes – subsequent receipt of more accurate information or data following validation of source data.
- c. Changes to our regulatory remit – much of the data we publish is linked to the providers we regulate. Where new providers register, subject to available data, we will update our statistics.

## **Methodology changes**

16. If we plan to make significant changes to established statistics' data collection systems, or we propose to make major changes in statistical methodology, definitions or categories for statistics, we will provide users with advance notice about the changes, explaining why the changes are being made.

17. Our 2018-21 data strategy commits us to reviewing the data we request annually, introducing new data requirements and changes cautiously and infrequently, primarily to reduce burden on providers. We will consider collecting new or different data where it will improve our effectiveness in supporting students' interests.

18. Where any OfS data release includes time series, we will normally use the most up-to-date data available at the time of release; therefore, time series figures may differ from previously published data releases.

## **Planned data changes**

19. Some of our publications are planned on the basis that there will be a first release based on provisional data, followed by further releases based on revised or final data. In these cases we will set out in the first release how and when the revised or final statistics will be published.

20. For official statistics publications, we will release the revised data according to the pre-announced date on the OfS statistics release schedule, in compliance with the same official statistics principles and practices as the original information.

21. Where data is dynamic and amendments occur on a regular and rolling basis, we will release a revised dataset with the most accurate data available on a regular basis and will publish information on how often these updates will occur. We use this approach in Unistats where we update the Unistats metrics with a revised dataset annually on a specific date; however,

providers are able to make amendments to their submitted data on a weekly basis thereafter to reflect any changes in their programmes.<sup>2</sup>

## Unscheduled corrections

22. There are two main reasons for making unscheduled corrections to our statistical publications:

- a. Unplanned data changes – subsequent receipt of more accurate information or data following the discovery of an error.
- b. Process errors – errors in our statistical or quality assurance systems and processes.

## Unplanned data changes

23. We use a number of different data sources submitted by higher education providers, including provider-level surveys and individualised student data and finance returns. Sometimes errors are identified in the data after it has been finally submitted or signed-off by providers and after we have used the data.

24. We have an established [data amendments process](#) to assess whether we require data amendments to be made, and whether and how we use amended data to change outcomes.

25. We only accept amendments to final submitted data in exceptional circumstances. An OfS data amendment panel assesses errors using information submitted by the provider. The panel will recommend whether we require the errors to be corrected based on whether they meet criteria to be accepted as amendments.

26. Where errors are accepted as amendments through this process, we will correct a provider's data – this amended data becomes the primary dataset for that provider, and we will use this amended data for any process that later requires that dataset. However, we will not automatically make changes to the current outcomes of the use of our data. We will instead consider the impact of the amendments separately for the different purposes of the data. It is our policy to only process implications for a specific purpose where the impact on that purpose is material. For example, an error may require correction for regulatory purposes, but we will not process the funding implications if they are not material.

## Process errors

27. Whilst we have robust quality assurance systems and processes in place to minimise errors in statistical systems and processes, and review these procedures regularly, we recognise that occasionally errors may happen. Where such errors do occur, we will take the following course of action:

- a. The Head of Profession will make a rapid assessment of the significance of the error on the interpretation of the statistics and determine an appropriate response in terms of alerting users and publishing revisions.

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<sup>2</sup> Further details about our approach to Unistats revisions and corrections are available at: <https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/advice-and-guidance/student-information-and-data/unistats/unistats-revisions-and-corrections-statement/>

- b. If the error is deemed to be major (one which is likely to change a user's interpretation of the data or trends that the data show), the error will be corrected as soon as possible and users of the output will be informed promptly via the relevant publication medium – usually the OfS website – and via direct contact where contact details of specific users are known. We will endeavour to explain the scale, nature, cause and likely impact of the error.
- c. A minor error (one which is not likely to affect a user's interpretation of the data) will be amended in the next release of the data and details of the error will be logged to ensure that it is not repeated in subsequent editions of the statistical output. Users will be notified of minor corrections in the next release of data.
- d. We will investigate any errors to determine the cause of the error, its impact, and a list of corrective actions to minimise the risk of any repetition.

## Openness

28. Within the OfS we work hard to create and maintain a working environment characterised by openness and trust. We believe that being open and honest about our mistakes is a vital part of learning. To this end we also encourage users of our data to report any issues to us. All of our statistical reports have contact details so that users can get in touch with the lead analyst for the report. In the case of official statistics, users can also contact us through the official statistics email address: [official.statistics@officeforstudents.org.uk](mailto:official.statistics@officeforstudents.org.uk).

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Head of Profession

Office for Students

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