

Copy of HESA's communications about the new Tariff request for data

Dear Colleague

I write to inform you about requests for data that HESA has received from compilers of league tables (specifically The Times and The Guardian) regarding tariff scores, together with HESA's decision on how we will respond to these.

The requests we have received seek mean tariff score information for entrants in the 2015/16 HESA Student Record using the new tariff point methodology due to be applied for entrants commencing courses in autumn 2017. This would involve retrospectively applying the new point allocations for entry qualifications held and reported within the 2015/16 HESA Student Record. We have made both of these compilers fully aware of the caveats in using new tariff scores for pre-2017 entry cohorts. In previous UCAS communications regarding the implementation of the new tariff points methodology a proposed plan indicated no significant uses of new tariff point scores in the public domain until 2019.

In reviewing these requests we have considered the following issues:

1. The Unistats website for prospective students and their advisors already publishes mean tariff scores using the new methodology retrospectively applied to 2013/14 and 2014/15 entrants. The same methodology applied to 2015/16 entrants will be published later this year. To quote the Unistats website:
"The UCAS Tariff has changed for courses starting in September 2017. The new Tariff uses a different numeric scale to allow more qualifications to be added. As it is possible to map old Tariff points to the equivalent new Tariff points, Unistats displays points held by students who were previously enrolled on the course expressed in new Tariff points. This is to allow comparison with Tariff information displayed elsewhere for 2017 courses."
2. The compilers of league tables are similarly interested in using tariff data that allows comparisons with tariff information displayed elsewhere for 2017 courses. HESA policy is not to refuse access to data unless there are clear grounds for doing so, such as data protection concerns, evidence that a data sharing agreement would not be adhered to, or concerns about the quality of data in relation to the intended usage. The first and second of these would not be applicable in this case. The third, data quality grounds, would be difficult to argue when Unistats – one of the key official sources of course data – is already publishing new tariff data for pre 2017 students. If HESA were to refuse to supply this information we must also consider what alternative approaches might be taken by the league table compilers to obtain it:
 - a. A request could be issued to all HE institutions under Freedom of Information legislation – it would be for HE institutions to decide whether there were sufficient grounds to refuse such a request. In any case this would present an unwelcome burden on sector institutions.
 - b. The data set that is published in Unistats is an open data resource. In theory that could be used to recreate tariff data for the published league tables although, given the structure and complexity of the data set, this would very likely result in highly unsatisfactory data.

- c. HESA could be asked instead to provide details of the entry qualifications reported in the HESA Student Record with league table compilers then applying the published new tariff methodology to the qualifications data themselves. This also carries risks of inconsistent application of methodology between league tables and resulting poor data.

Weighing up these considerations carefully we have concluded that there are no valid grounds for HESA to refuse to supply the information requested on tariff scores. In addition the outcome from such a refusal could have significant negative implications. Therefore we have decided to fulfil these tariff data requests. However, as you will probably be aware, it is HESA policy to preview all data requests for high profile applications (such as league tables) to HE providers in advance of delivery to any third party. UCAS have advised that there may be sensitivity within HE providers about any use of new tariff data for this purpose. Therefore in the case of this request for new tariff data for league table uses we will invite each HE provider concerned to inform us if they would prefer for this data to be with-held for their institution; HESA will abide by any such request. In addition we shall provide enhanced data during the preview process to enable HE providers to more fully understand the impact of the new tariff derivation.

The approximate expected timeline for these data requests is as follows, please note we will continue to update to DDS calendar when contracts are signed:

Formal request from The Guardian finalised 10 February 2017

Two-week preview to HE providers of data proposed for supply commences 6 March 2017

Deadline for requests to with-hold the new tariff data 20 March 2017

Data supplied to The Guardian 21 March 2017

Formal request from The Times finalised 28 February 2017.

If you have any further questions about these requests or HESA's decision on data release please contact HESA at DDS@hesa.ac.uk or 01242 211133.