

Policy on Student Surveys and Guaranteeing Confidentiality of Feedback

Approved by [University Teaching Committee](#) (M14-15/128) on 12 March, 2015

Updated on 22 July, 2015 to reflect HEFCE's revised NSS publication threshold

Aim

The Business Intelligence Unit/Academic Support Office as survey managers will only release data to departments where the number of respondents is at least the minimum specified by the survey provider. Where no minimum is set, the normal minimum threshold will be 10 students from a given category (e.g. programme, department), except in cases where the minimum threshold will not be sufficient to protect the identity of individuals.

The policy implies that further analysis below the minimum threshold will not be feasible. For example, it will not be possible to breakdown student numbers further by a measure such as age or gender.

Motivation

Surveys are a well established mechanism for obtaining feedback from the student community on a range of topics. Examples of independent surveys which the University officially participates in are [NSS](#) (National Student Survey), [PTES](#) (Postgraduate Taught Experience Survey) and [UKES](#) (United Kingdom Engagement Survey).

A key aspect of handling survey results is to ensure the anonymity of feedback - it is important that an individual student cannot be directly or indirectly identified via their confidential input. For example, in a department where only a handful of students have responded, whilst a full name may not have been asked for as part of the survey, it can still be possible to work out an individual's response by drilling down via a demographic such as domicile or age group. To prevent this, from the outset of a survey, it is important to be clear with respondents (students) and staff on the thresholds at which data will be released.

Consistent policy across all surveys

The NSS was launched in 2005 and has always operated with a clear policy on data analysis. In 2015, following a [sector wide consultation](#), HEFCE decided to lower the headcount or full-person equivalent (FPE1) threshold for publication of student-level data on the [Unistats](#) website and for publicly available NSS data, from 23 to 10. For NSS data, the 50 per cent response threshold will still apply. Within an institution, a publication threshold of 10 responses is applied to its own NSS data.

Some other surveys whilst assuring anonymity, do not actually specify a minimum number of respondents. For example, the [PRES 2015 data protection policy](#) states:-

“All data collected in this survey will be held securely. Results are confidential to your institution, though your institution may choose to share or publish aggregated, anonymous results. All participating institutions have agreed not to identify any individuals when reporting their results internally or externally, and to use their best efforts to ensure that no individuals can be identified by implication. The full PRES dataset will be available to the Higher Education Academy in order to conduct analysis, and all results will be reported in an aggregated and anonymised form.”.

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