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Student poll is 'not valid'

This was the headline in 'The Times Higher' in October [1] citing criticisms of the National Poll of 170,000 HE students made by Harvey Goldstein, professor of statistics at Bristol University and Ivor Goddard, the director-general of the Royal Statistical Society. Both were members of the steering committee for the pilot version of the National Student Satisfaction Survey (NSS) [2], that has strong reservations about publishing results of the survey; Professor Goldstein's letter, expressing reservations, had been published in THES last year shortly after the preliminary results of the HE student satisfaction survey were produced. Earlier, in June 2004 the Education Guardian had carried an article that presented mixed reactions to the survey but included some doubts about the questions asked [3].

The Higher Education Funding Council for England (Hefce) had reneged on an agreement to include statistical "uncertainty intervals" where response rates were low. As Professor Goldstein expresses it: -
"It was generally agreed that a condition for the survey's validity was the provision of statistical uncertainty intervals for the scores.....Since these intervals now seem to have been dropped, it is not possible to make scientifically valid comparisons between institutions"

The THES article explained that *"Under the NSS, students rated various aspects of their university experience on a scale from one to five.*

The categories were awarded an average score by Hefce, which managed the survey. It created the first national league table of students' assessment of the quality of their experiences."

Although the Hefce had disregarded the safeguards agreed, they acknowledged the issue by excluding any results for departments with fewer than 30 respondents. The problem remained that averages based on a sample of 40 or 50 respondents would still have large confidence intervals. Moreover those departments excluded, mainly small specialist institutions, were displeased with their omission [4] .

Following the interview with Harvey Goldstein and Ivor Goddard there were further letters from academics dissatisfied with the poll and concerned about methodological issues. They all supported the view that, so far from providing students with better information to help them make informed choices, the survey could be highly misleading [4].

Harvey Goldstein has produced a paper analysing the 2003 HEFCE national student survey pilot data and this can be accessed from his website [5].

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