
Director General for Regulation

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27 October 2016

Dear Professor MacInnes,

I am replying to your email to the Statistics Authority dated 15 September. We have discussed the issues you have raised with colleagues in the Department for Education (DfE). As part of these discussions, we have asked that the HEFCE consider the wording and prominence of the advice on the quality of the National Student Survey (NSS) statistics, with respect to use, in the light of the ONS review of data sources.

HEFCE include a "Guide to the Data" (<http://www.hefce.ac.uk/it/nss/faq/>) with their distribution of the results from the NSS. This does not explicitly advise against ranking the results in league tables but does give an explanation of the confidence intervals associated with each estimate from the survey and linked information on interpreting the indicators showing whether a result is significantly different from the associated benchmark.

HEFCE's Unistats site, which delivers NSS results alongside the Key Information Set, provides tools to compare courses but does not rank the results. Unistats also provides some advice (in "About Unistats") on results from small samples, including an example of the sort of observed difference that would be regarded as significant. The Unistats dataset is also available as a full download and via an API.

The Authority welcomes the open availability of these data for further usage, but having that open availability does mean that the DfE and HEFCE can only advise on, but not control, usage of the data. In particular, DfE or HEFCE cannot constrain the use made by the HEAcademy.

The Teaching Excellence Framework uses the results from the NSS, compared against benchmarks, but as one part of a range of indicators and other qualitative information. The DfE does not rank these results in its own analysis. The DfE's specification for TEF does not include any ranking of NSS results nor of the overall TEF results. The TEF assessors will have expert statistical support and will work with results averaged over years to help provide more robust conclusions.

The HEFCE is not formally listed as a producer of official statistics and so the Authority cannot request a formal assessment. However, we do have strong professional links through the Government Statistical Service in line with these professional connections, and as mentioned in the first paragraph above, we therefore have asked HEFCE to make improvements to its advice on the quality and use of the statistics.

I hope that this response helps to meet your concerns.

Yours sincerely



Ed Humpherson