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Student Surveys – “You don’t think about the good things”

League tables are often used to compare universities and are increasingly becoming the focus for the selection of universities by national and international students. Yet, there can be little separating all but the top universities, and hence small changes in weighting for the component elements of a survey can greatly influence the results, leading to significant influences on future student recruitment and financial sustainability of institutions, (Denson et al., 2010; Hou et al., 2012; Fielding et al., 2010).

The National Student Survey (NSS), which is a major source of data for UK league tables, is completed by students in their final year of study at all publically funded Higher Education Institutions in England, Wales, Northern Ireland, and the majority in Scotland. It asks for twenty-two statements to be considered. An apparent lack of definition of words within statements, however, led to the pilot study which is the focus for this Short Notice.

An opportunity sample of thirty final year students on a Bachelor of Arts Primary Education course, were invited for interview to explore how they had interpreted key words within statements from the NSS and how they allocated the levels of agreement such as ‘mostly agree’ and ‘disagree’. Following transcription two key themes emerged:

- The different interpretations students had of words within the survey statements.
- The disproportionate impact that critical incidents can have on a survey which requires responses spanning ‘a course as a whole’.

Although it was anticipated that the word ‘prompt’ would be key for *Statement 7: Feedback on my work has been ‘prompt’*, the interviews showed that instead, students had a narrow interpretation of what they considered to be ‘feedback’. One student explained that her response was based on: ‘assignment feedback and not on the feedback received throughout the course.’ Another mentioned oral feedback but when asked whether she considered this

when completing the survey stated: ‘No, it was just the written feedback on assignments that sprung to mind.’

Whilst it may be that the intention of Statement 7 is for students to focus on formal written assignment feedback, on professional courses, this excludes major, meaningful aspects of their work. As one student commented, ‘maybe people need to be more aware of it, (feedback), it is everything ... because with all my lesson observations, presentations ... I got very prompt, really quick feedback.’

From the interviews, it became increasingly evident that single incidents could adversely influence students’ level of satisfaction. For example, one student commented, ‘When I look at the statements I go, what negative thing could I think about that? So everything is “definitely agree” ... but then you think, so can I think of anything negative that would bring it down?’ Similarly, on deciding the extent of agreement for a statement, another student would start with the ‘definitely agree, consider incidents, and then “knock it back”.’

The interviewer explored the issues of students responding to a survey relating to a ‘course as a whole’, and how their responses therefore may not always reflect the totality of each year of study. Each student acknowledged that they focused predominantly on the final year of study, unless a critical incident was remembered, as one student concluded ‘... you don’t think about the good things.’

The interviews demonstrated that the NSS is a blunt tool, especially for evaluating vocational degrees which include a wide range of elements, types of assessments, and sometimes lengthy and intense placements. It was clear that students did not really consider, as requested by the survey, the ‘whole course’ but tended to focus on the final year, although negative incidents from any year were used to ‘pull “definitely agree” down.’ Discussions also showed that students’ interpretations of terms did not always reflect all that had taken place. This was particularly evident when viewing students’ narrow definition of ‘feedback’.

It may be considered inappropriate for Higher Education Institutions to direct the way that students respond to surveys. However, results from 'whole course' final year student surveys will continue to lack meaning until key words are more accurately defined and results are contextualised, in terms of type and length of degree course, number of students enrolled upon them and subject content. Thus, at present it is perhaps in the interest of Universities to offer definitions which more closely reflect what has taken place on a 'course as a whole' and for students to be encouraged to 'think about the good things'.

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