

Student Experience Report (SER)

Part 1: Undergraduate Teaching and Learning: a Review of the National Student Survey Results

INTRODUCTION

In a departure from previous years' practice, I will be submitting the SER in three parts in order to cover in depth different aspects of the student experience. This part of my report will focus on the undergraduate student teaching and learning experience as captured by the 2013 National Student Survey results; Parts 2 and 3 of the SER will deal with the postgraduate experience and with the welfare of students, both postgraduate and undergraduate.

The NSS has faced criticism from both academics and students. Academics have questioned whether the figures have been 'gamed' and one leading commentator has even argued that it is absurd to attempt to measure student satisfaction as any student who believed themselves 'satisfied' on completing a course should be regarded as ineducable. (Collini, 2010) Students, within UUEAS, have argued against the NSS as they believe its use by universities in competitive league tables has contributed to the marketisation of higher education and a consequent loss of academic freedom.

However, I, and my fellow Officers, believe the NSS to be a valuable tool in quality assurance and that the quantitative data and the Open Comments section can be used to understand the concerns of students and we have formulated ways to address these concerns with a series of recommendations at the end of each section.

We welcome the University's policy that the NSS results form part of the agenda for the first meeting of each School's Staff Student Liaison Committee in the Autumn Semester. In our work with Student Representatives, we have noted the importance that academic staff members of SSLCs place on the NSS results as an aid to addressing any problems the results may highlight. We look forward to working with staff and students on the SSLCs in the coming year and we hope this report will contribute to this work.

In the report, I have included the categorisation of issues that my predecessor, Josh Bowker, used for the 2012 SER as they continue to represent the key concerns of students as expressed in the NSS. I have added, four new issues, which my examination of the NSS and consultations with University staff have shown to be areas where the University might take action to enhance the student experience at

UEA: module evaluation, exam timetabling, working with students with disabilities and support for students taking Joint Honours.

Louise Withers Green (Academic Officer)

24th September 2013

On behalf of UUEAS

MODULE EVALUATION

UUEAS Officers were given a presentation by the Associate Dean for Teaching and Learning for SCI in which they were shown an innovative use of NSS data in combination with Module Feedback to identify particular issues concerning teaching quality. Dr Milner then outlined to Officers the steps that had been taken to address these issues.

We believe Dr Milner's initiative to be an excellent example of how student feedback can be used to improve the student experience; it is a concrete example to students of the real benefits that filling in a module evaluation form can bring.

However, we note that, since the change from paper to electronic submission of module feedback, there has been a decline in the percentage of students engaging in the process and filling in their module evaluation forms. The University average is at present 39.9%, with the lowest score for a School being 29.3%.

We believe that UUEAS could make a significant contribution to improving the rates of module evaluation feedback through our campaigning and publicity resources where we could demonstrate to our members that evaluation was not a meaningless chore but a real opportunity to shape their education.

Union Recommends:

That the University continue towards building a system where NSS results are used in conjunction with module evaluation to 'drill down' to identify and remedy problems at School level.

That the University continues to work with UUEAS on projects that aim to: raise the profile of module feedback, increase the number of evaluation responses and create a culture of feedback and response within Schools.

FEEDBACK

Feedback continues to be a key concern for UEA students. We congratulate the University on the introduction of some form of exam feedback for all students and

we believe this will bring great benefits to our members and will feed forward very positively into future NSS results.

Presently, our members' major concern is the prompt return of coursework and we believe this should be also a major concern for the University. In this year's NSS, students have commented that they believe that some of the issues around the late return of coursework may be arise from the working practices of the Hubs.

A leading educationalist has argued that "feedback is most effective when given as soon as possible after performance" and this point is emphasised by many students in the NSS Open Comments. (Brinko, 1993) Students want to find out what they have got right and what they have got wrong *before* they submit the next piece of coursework.

The University scored 61% on NSS Question 7 '*feedback on my work has been prompt,*' down one per cent from the previous year. This result is disappointing especially when compared with the NSS top quartile score of 73%.

Within the University, there were some remarkable differences between Schools. Three sets of results stand out in relation to Question 7. HIS, which the previous year had had an excellent 81% satisfaction rate fell to 49%, DEV fell from 64% to 35% whilst SWK scored 100%. SWK also scored 100% on Question 8 relating to the quality of feedback.

NSS 2013 Open Comments:

"Feedback on marked work is supposed to be returned to us within 20 working days, which is longer than other universities aim to return it in, and frequently we have had to wait much longer than this for work to be returned..." [DEV]

"The new system for handing in and getting coursework back has created some issues. Now quite a long-winded process, which can be frustrating." [HIS]

Question 7: NSS 2013 results:

| HUM | UEA | AMS | ART | FTM | HIS | LCS | LDC | MUS | PHI | PSI |
|-------------|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|
| This year % | 61 | 48 | 76 | 57 | 49 | 72 | 41 | 50 | 58 | 60 |
| Last year % | 62 | 47 | 58 | 50 | 81 | 61 | 53 | 31 | 74 | 62 |

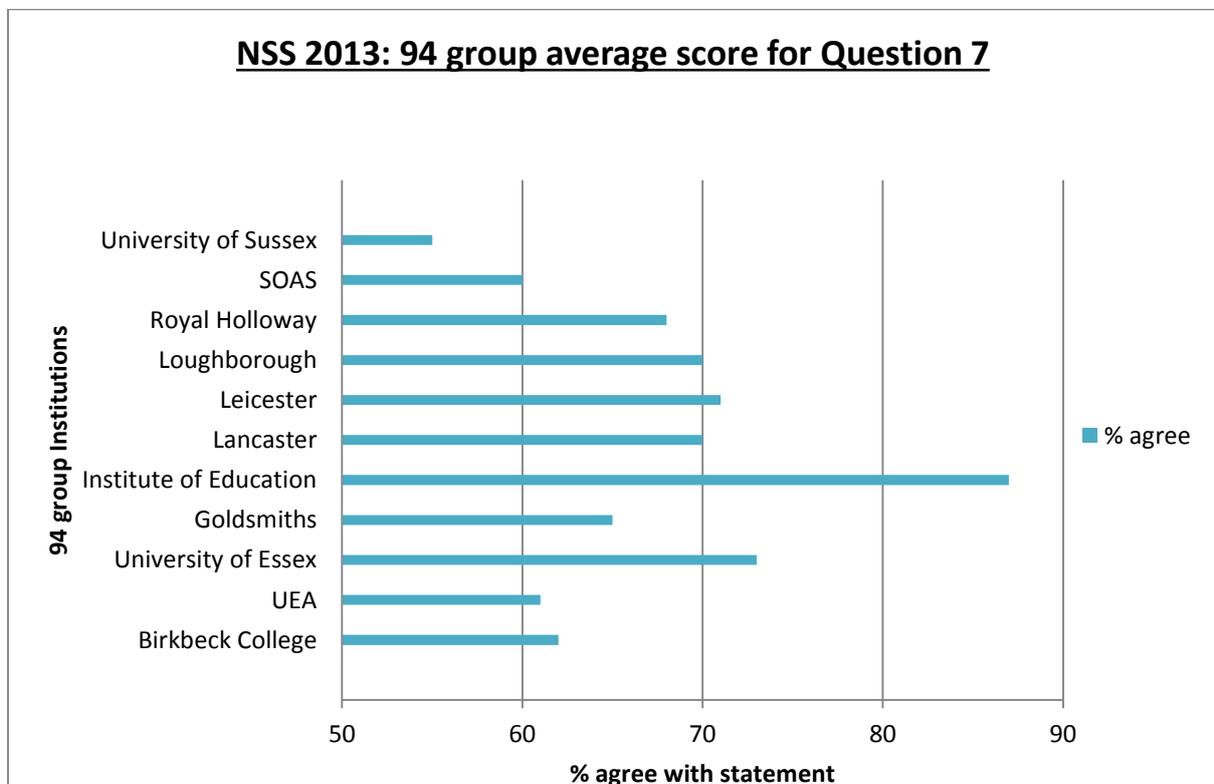
| SSF | UEA | DEV | ECO | EDU | LAW | NBS | NBS LON | PSY | SWK |
|-------------|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|---------|-----|-----|
| This year % | 61 | 35 | 84 | 70 | 66 | 67 | 96 | 46 | 100 |
| Last year % | 62 | 64 | 81 | 63 | 79 | 67 | - | - | - |

When I asked the SWK Director of Teaching whether there was any particular factor behind the School's performance; she noted she could not identify one in particular but commented that "high standards of feedback are expected."

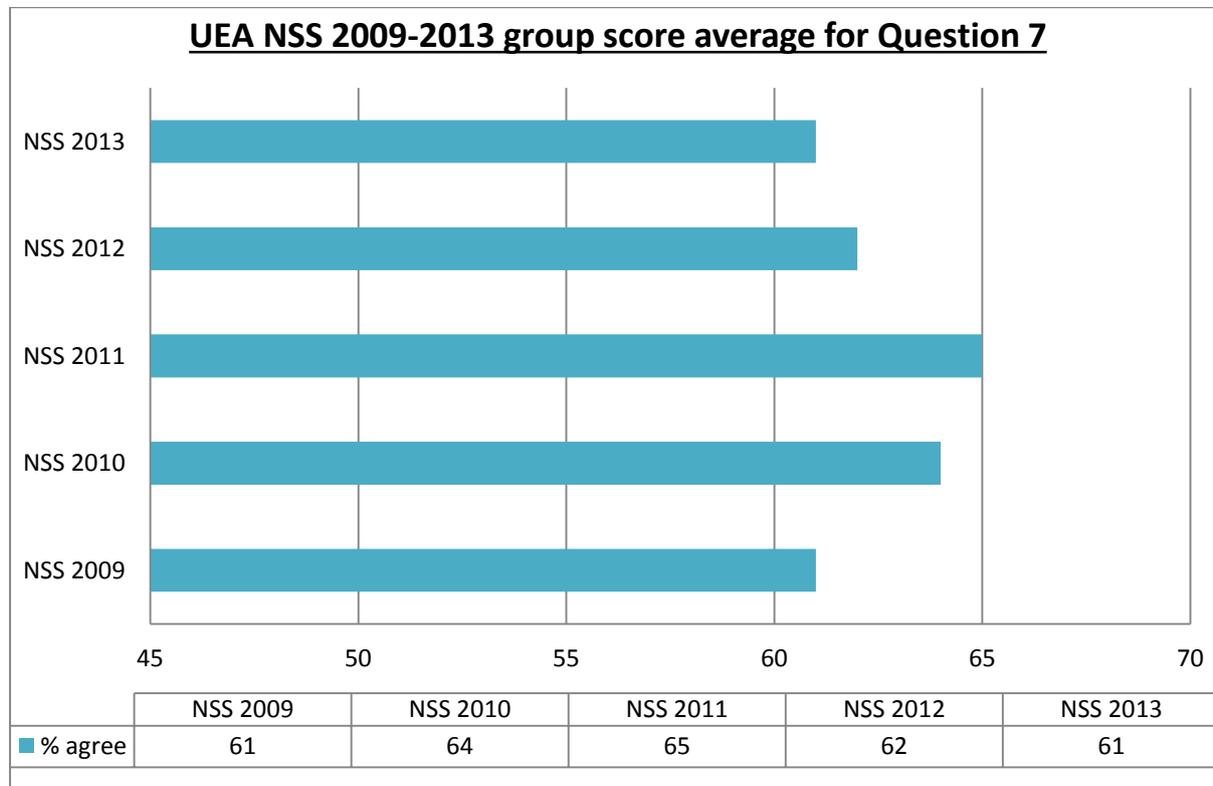
Here, it is useful to consider UEA's scores on Question 7 against universities which also belong to the 94 group.

"As 1994 Group universities tend to have smaller student populations, close-knit academic communities emerge naturally on campus, offering highly personalized learning with few barriers between students, teachers and researchers. This is one reason our universities have far outperformed the sector in all National Student Surveys since its establishment in 2005." (1994 group website)

The beliefs of UEA tie well into this ethos, and surely an improved turnaround time for feedback would further reduce barriers in the future. The 1994 group are successful within the NSS; however when looking at the scores for Question 7 for each institution within the group there were some significant differences.



UEA are within the lower percentile of these scores, but with work and consultation with students, the University has the ability to improve these scores on this question. As the graph below illustrates, the 2009-2013 group score average at UEA for question 7 has remained largely stable, although in decline since 2011.



We would submit that the difference in performance as to return of coursework is not only due to different practices within Schools but also can be placed in the way that different Schools are serviced by different Hubs. We do not think it coincidental that HIS students, after having first raised the issue with academic staff, raised their concerns about the procedures for submission and return of coursework of their Hub at Union Council and the fact that the HIS NSS score fell so dramatically.

NSS 2013 Open Comments:

"Poor administration through the centralised "hub" system." (LAW)

"We had a lot of trouble with marking and the bureaucratic side of things. There was poor communication between administrative staff and the teachers." (LDC)

"Support throughout the course was greatly diminished by centralising the administration of all health science subjects to one central office – all the health courses are very individual in their needs and medicine especially needs to be very well organised and supported with quick and reliable information and up-to-date admin." (MED)

Union recommends:

That the University continues its policy of providing some form of feedback on exams and looks to develop the range and quality of exam feedback.

That the University should consider the twenty day turnaround of coursework to be an imperative rather than an aspiration.

That, as recommended in last year's SER, the University should continue to look at best practices in particular Hubs and also, at the same time, to examine the relationship between Schools and Hubs in those cases where a School has experienced a dramatic decline in its NSS Question 7 scores.

ACADEMIC SUPPORT

Once again, the University scored highly in NSS questions relating to staff support. Satisfaction has climbed to 88% which reflects the hard work and engagement of academic staff right across the University.

However, we have two concerns in this area.

Firstly, the NSS results will, inevitably, not reflect the experience of students who had experienced problems and had to discontinue their studies. We welcome the initiative from NSC targeted at reaching, at an early stage, those students who are experiencing difficulties by strengthening the requirement to meet their adviser.

Secondly, as in last year's SER, we believe the evidence points to a less robust system of support being in place for those students who are not on campus; this is reflected in the Open Comments section and the quantitative data for FMH students on placement.

On placements, only 75% of respondents agreed that they had received sufficient preparatory information prior to their placement; whilst in the Open Comments, students commented on a perceived lack of support when they were organising their placements. Other students reported a lack of support during their placements.

NSS 2013 Open Comments:

"There is not proper support around placements if there are any issues." (AHP)

"We as students have to arrange our final placements and for me as a mature student, I find this very difficult as a lot of placements don't fit into my family lifestyle and some support would be nice." (AHP)

"Not always knowing where I was going on placement and mentors not understanding their own role in my skills development."(NSC)

We would submit that the period when students are away from campus working in a challenging environment is the period when they need the most support and access to advice.

Union recommends: that the University ensures that adequate resources, are allocated to the support of students both when finding and during their placements

and that this might include the provision of an Online Hub specifically for students on placements.

LEARNING RESOURCES

The Library's NSS performance was, again, excellent with an overall satisfaction level of 90%. The result, we believe reflects the hard work of the Library staff and their receptiveness to students' ideas and suggestions, such as the 24-hour opening initiative.

NSS 2013 Open Comments:

"The library facilities are fantastic and the 24-hour opening hours are really useful." [DEV]

"The library times are good because it is open 24/7 now." [HIS]

"Also the library has been invaluable resource - with the new 24-hour service a very convenient facility to allow uninterrupted studying." [NBS]

"...the introduction of 24-hour library opening time was genius!" [PHA]

The Library staff's attendance at SSLCs gives them a direct channel for engagement with student reps and the ability to assess the specific needs of students in each particular School.

The decline in the number of negative comments in the Open Comments section on the issue of lack of core texts reflects the Library's proactive work in this area.

The Library's programme to get students to highlight where more books are needed is another great initiative that we fully support and would like to help through our campaigning and communications.

Union recommends:

That the University continues to make resources available to allow 24-hour opening.

That the Library and UUEAS work together to publicise any initiatives on ordering of books.

THE MUSIC SCHOOL

My predecessor titled this section of his report, 'the Degradation of the Music Experience' but I am happy to report that, although from the low base that one would expect for a closing School the NSS results this year showed a small increase in Overall Satisfaction and only a small decrease in satisfaction concerning Teaching Quality, from 80% to 78%. We believe that this result reflects the efforts of the

members of staff of the Music Monitoring Group working together with student representatives.

We further believe that lessons have been learned by both the University and UUEAS as to the importance of early consultation and of working together whenever a major restructuring of the University is proposed.

A positive development has been the initiative by the Head of Learning and Teaching Services in consulting with the Student Officers and Faculty Convenor over the forthcoming restructuring of HUM and the establishment of a timetable of consultation meetings that will, also, involve meeting with student representatives in the affected Schools.

Also, we welcome the initiative of the Course Director of the new HUM Foundation Year Programme in meeting with UUEAS at an early stage and in working with UUEAS to ensure that student representation will play a key role in the programme's inception.

Union recommends:

That the University continues to work with student representatives in MUS to ensure that any issues that arise are dealt with swiftly and effectively.

That the University - when considering any restructuring of learning and teaching - will consult with student representatives as early as possible and will work with the reps throughout the process.

UEA LONDON

UEA London had excellent NSS scores with Overall Satisfaction equalling the University's score of 93%; in Assessment and Feedback, it outperformed the University by 91% to 72%.

So we would conclude that is no issue with the provision of teaching and learning. However, UEA London's score on Question 23, satisfaction with the Students' Union showed a marked negative differential: 68% against 84%. We believe that this figure reflects the relative lack of student activities available at UEA London in comparison with those available at the Norwich campus.

Union recommends:

The provision of funding for more activities, both social and sporting, at UEA London.

JOINT HONOURS

The problems that face this group of students are hidden in the NSS quantitative data as these students are not placed in a separate category within the data sets. However, my predecessors and I have noticed a steady number of students commenting, in the Open Comments, about the problems that they have faced.

It is apparent that Joint Honours students often experience their two subjects as almost completely separate rather than the interdisciplinary experience that, one would hope, the University's 'Do Different' approach would aspire to. These students often feel they have no natural 'home' on campus and no arrangements are made for them to meet other students undertaking the same degree combination.

NSS Open Comments 2011-13:

2013

"This is a joint honours course and there is not enough recognition of that as I only get half the information I need." [LDC]

"Because it is a joint degree between two schools of study you are halfway between both, and your academic advisor is one school when most of the modules you take are in another." [CMP]

"Each subject could have been slightly better integrated. Doing a triple honours I sometimes felt like I was doing 3 subjects." [ECO]

2012

"If doing a joint degree would be good if the staff from different departments communicated more and didn't set deadlines all at the same time." [ART]

"Lack of coordination between departments." [ENV]

"Doing a joint course, it has been difficult to manage the overlap with feedback. I was not given an advisor for each subject that I was studying making it difficult for me to look for help in regard to my other subject." [LDC]

2011

"Joint Honours students should be included in events from both schools, not just the school they are in." [PHI]

"As I study a joint course I feel that a dedicated interdisciplinary module each year, to create a better understanding of how to link the two subjects (in preparation for the dissertation, especially) was really needed." [ART]

Union recommends:

That the University provides a separate forum within the representation structure where Joint Honours students can bring their concerns to staff.

That Joint Honours students be assigned to the same seminar groups to allow for debate to become truly interdisciplinary.

That the University investigates the possibility of assigning, as academic advisers to Joint Honours students, staff that have experience teaching in more than one School.

EXAM TIMETABLES

In a similar way to the issue of Joint Honours, student concerns over exam timetabling are revealed in the Open Comments section of the NSS results. The key concerns for students are exam 'bunching' where students are faced with a significant number of exams packed into only a few days within the exam period and what students perceive as the inordinately late release of exam timetables. The latter concern is one of particular importance to working students, student carers and international students. Both these issues have been raised at SSLCs with exam 'bunching' seeming to be a particular problem for the larger Schools. We realise the problem of 'exam bunching' may have been exacerbated by the move away from Saturday exams and we realise the problems faced by the University that this might have brought.

NSS 2013 Open Comments:

"We get exam dates really late and there is no reason for it." [DEV]

"...last year I had 5 exams in the first 4 days of [the] examination period. It was mentally and physically hard." [ECO]

"Exam timetable is often concentrated into a matter of days, last year we had 2 major exams on the same day. Very stressful." [ECO]

"Late release of exam dates [makes] revision hard to plan." [LAW]

"I was definitely not happy with the way the exams were organised, particularly in my second year. They were far too close together and I felt that this damaged my capability to achieve the best marks I possibly could." [PSY]

Union recommends:

That the University investigates the feasibility of devising a programme of exam timetabling to ensure that students are not disadvantaged by having to take all their exams in an unacceptably short period of time.

That the University examines best practice across other HE institutions as to how to facilitate earlier release of exam timetables.

INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS

The NSS data and Open Comments revealed no particular issues specific to this group of students.

I will address the provision of activities for International Students and specific welfare issues relating to this group in the third part of the SER.

STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES

The results for Students with Disabilities' satisfaction with the organisation of their course showed a score of 82% as against the UEA average of 88%. After consultation with other students with disabilities - I am dyslexic and dyspraxic myself - I would suggest that this discrepancy could be explained by the fact that, although the quality of help available to students with disabilities is first class, one needs good organisational skills to access it and organisational skill is precisely the area where many of us have difficulties.

NSS 2013 Open Comments:

"As a dyslexic student I don't think the support they offer is well organised. I was supposed to have an academic tutor in relation to this but they didn't sort that out. They're not very proactive at following up on stuff like that." [AMS]

Union recommends:

That the University investigates the possibility of increasing the ease of access to support services for students with disabilities.

AFTERWORD

We welcome any comments on our report and its recommendations and look forward to working with you all on the continued improvement in the provision of teaching and learning to our members.

I will be working with the President of the Graduate Students Association (GSA) and members of the GSA Committee to produce Part 2 of the SER, the Postgraduate Student Experience, which will be submitted to SEC at its February meeting.

Part 3 will also be submitted to the February Committee and this will focus on Student Welfare.

REFERENCES:

Kathleen T. Brinko, 'The Practice of Giving Feedback to improve teaching: What is effective?' in *The Journal of Higher Education*, Volume 64, No. 5 (Sept-Oct 1993), 574-593.

Stefan Collini, 'Browne's Gamble,' in *London Review of Books*, Volume 32, No. 21, (21st November 2010), 23-25.

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All NSS Comments and Data taken from <http://nss.ipsos-archway.com/>
