Understanding the National Student Survey: Investigations in Languages, Linguistics and Area Studies

Summary report by John Canning

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Contents

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Summary

1. This report summarises students and staff interpretations of the National Student Survey (NSS) from ten departments in nine institutions.
2. The NSS is valued by university senior management as a means of comparing their institution with others, as a tool for promoting the institution and identifying issues which need to be addressed.
3. All eight of the 22 questions (or more accurately statements) investigated in this study are open to some degree of interpretation.
4. Many questions are 'double-barrelled', i.e. they ask about more than one 'issue' in a single question. In these cases students tend to focus in on one or other of the issues.
5. The staff focus groups and student interviews presented opportunities for discussion about key issues.
6. There are particular practical and methodological shortcomings in exploring the experiences of joint honours students. Their experience of different subjects can be vastly different and the survey has no means of addressing this.
7. Although problematic as a survey, the NSS is a useful starting point for staff-student dialogue, which has the potential to enhance the quality of the student learning experience.

Introduction

This report is a summary of interviews and focus groups with around 100 students and 50 members of academic staff in departments of languages, linguistics or area studies at nine universities in the UK. In recent years, concerns have been expressed about the ambiguity of some of the statements which students are asked to respond to in the National Student Survey (NSS).[1] This project set out to get a better understanding of how students and staff understand the questions. The interviews and focus groups were carried out by members of academic staff at the nine institutions who each then wrote an individual report of their findings. This summary is designed to enable wider distribution of these findings without identifying individual staff, institutions `or departments.

The NSS consists of 22 questions, divided into six sections[2]

- The Teaching on my Course
- Assessment and Feedback
- Academic Support
- Organisation and Management
- Learning Resources

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[1] For example, Higher Education Academy *National Student Survey Institutional Case Studies* (2007) www.**hea**cademy.ac.uk/assets/York/.../nss/nss_case_studies_nov07_v5.doc
[2] See Appendix 2 for a full list of the questions

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- Personal Development

Question 22 is a general summary statement, "Overall, I am satisfied with the quality of the course". This is the question most frequently used by the media to feed into league tables and it is likely that the responses to this question and a few other selected questions will contribute to the Key Information Sets (KIS) which HEFCE expects institutions to make available from September 2012. The KIS is intended to inform student choice by giving students information on student satisfaction, graduate salaries, tuition fees and accommodation costs as well as data on contact time and assessment types for each course offered.[3] It is intended that this information will lead to a rise in quality as unsatisfactory courses or courses with poor employment outcomes close whilst well received courses with good employment outcomes prosper.

The introduction of fees of up to £9,000 per year in England from September 2012 means that understanding the student voice in higher education is becoming increasingly important. The NSS is a key contributor to the data which helps to inform student choice. Therefore, understanding student interpretations of the questions is critical.

This project focused on just eight of the 22 questions, namely:

- Staff have made the subject interesting (question 2)
- Assessment arrangements and marking have been fair (question 6)
- Feedback on my work has helped to clarify things I did not understand (question 9)
- I have received sufficient advice and support with my studies (question 10)
- The course is well organised and is running smoothly (question 15)
- The library resources and services and good enough for my needs (question 16)
- The course has helped me present myself with confidence (question 19)
- Overall, I am satisfied with the quality of the course (question 22)

Prior engagement with the National Student Survey

Colleagues reported differing levels of prior engagement with the NSS. One colleague reported that the NSS only became important about two years ago, having been largely ignored at school level until that point. Another small department with mostly joint honours students reported very little prior engagement as the response rate and number of responses had not been sufficient for their scores to be published.

As widely reported elsewhere assessment and feedback have been particularly targeted as these questions generally report score lower levels of satisfaction than other sections of the

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[3] See http://www.hefce.ac.uk/learning/infohe/kis.htm

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survey.[4] A number of departments reported a senior management drive to increase response rates so that thresholds for publishing the data might be met. Many colleagues reported that the profile of the NSS was increasing at their institution with publicity on TV screens, posters, emails and SMS messages. Some students valued this visibility, but others found it off-putting. "You said… we did" leaflets of the sort used by Flint et al were also mentioned. [5]

Understanding the questions

This section outlines staff and student thoughts about the meaning of the questions. In most cases the interviews were carried out with students who had already filled in the survey and they were asked to recall the things they thought about as they answered the questions. Staff and students have a wide variety of individual interpretations of the questions and whilst, the perspectives reported below are often contradictory and may not be representative of students and staff as a whole, they are thoughts which have been uncovered by colleagues carrying out the interviews.

Question 2: Staff have made the subject interesting

Many students reported a bias towards thinking about recent experiences in answering this question. The question is a difficult one as students will have had many different teachers and experiences over the duration of their course, so it is difficult to generalise. Some students reported different experiences of teaching in seminars as opposed to lectures. Students cited the use of technology, songs and videos as important in making the subject interesting. There was also a common view that making the subject interesting was correlated with the use of teaching methods other than 'just lecturing'. In many cases it appears that lecturing represents the antithesis of interest.

Some students expressed the view that there were certain foundational aspects of the course material which could not possibly be interesting, irrespective of how they were taught. Learning grammar was commonly cited an essential activity which could not possibly be made interesting, though other students reported that they found grammar very interesting.

Many staff challenged the idea that it was the staff's responsibility to make the subject interesting. Some students and staff expressed the view that the subject was intrinsically interesting (that is why the student chose the subject in the first place and the staff chose to teach in the field) and the question implies that the student is passive in his or her learning, waiting to be entertained, by staff charged with enthusing otherwise dormant students.

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[4] E.g. James Williams et al, *Exploring the National Student Survey: Assessment and feedback issues* (York: Higher Education Academy, 2008),
http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/assets/documents/nss/NSS_assessment_and_feedback_issues.pdf
[5] Abbi Flint et al., "Preparing for success: one institution's aspirational and student focused response to the National Student Survey," *Teaching in Higher Education* 14, no. 6 (2009): 607-618.

Question 6: Assessment arrangements and marking have been fair

Colleagues reported a tendency for students and staff to focus in on *either* assessment arrangements *or* marking. One colleague referred to this as a 'double-barrelled' question— the marking might be fair, but the assessment arrangements unfair or vice versa. One student said "I understand the question but I think they're two completely different things". Staff and students cited the slightly cynical notion that there may be a correlation between perceived fairness and marks awarded, a high mark being seen as fair and a low mark as unfair. The discussions focused largely on coursework rather than exams and concerns were raised about the coordination of coursework hand-in dates across different modules. Within departments, students reported inconsistencies in marking and assessment for different languages and hidden criteria which slowly become apparent to the student. One student reported that "French want nouns, Spanish want themes", but this was something the students had worked out for themselves.

Students also considered fairness in assessment as they linked to the relationship between assessment and lecture content.

In one staff focus group it was acknowledged that the method of assessment is not always up to the individual member of teaching staff, but the marking is. In another department it was discovered that some staff were continuing to use out-dated assessment criteria, as they considered them 'better' than more recent criteria. There were also conversations about using the full range of marks—it was evident that there were different practices going on within the same department.

Question 9: Feedback on my work has helped me to clarify things I did not understand

This question is of particular concern to teaching colleagues as raw scores for satisfaction tend to be lower in the area of feedback than any other part of the survey. Students reported thinking about feedback entirely in terms of written comments on work. They agreed that feedback might be oral, or given through email, or given to students in groups when the interviewer suggested this, but most admitted to only thinking about written feedback when answering the NSS. At the same time some students reported that they found face-to-face feedback more useful than written feedback.

Feedback was seen by many students as negative, i.e. about what they did wrong. There is sometimes a perception that feedback is not useful after the assignment has been handed in, as there is little a student can do with the feedback at this point. Some students reported that feedback tended to focus on referencing and essay structure rather than content. At one staff focus group a lecturer expressed the view that at GCSE and A-level students had become very used to detailed assessment criteria and doing past papers and were used to receiving an unrealistic amount of written feedback. This lecturer felt that the question may lead

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students to expect that they should be receiving a similar sort of feedback at university. Another staff group felt that students are used to very targeted feedback at school, so providing specific feedback was more important than providing a large quantity of feedback.

Some students reported receiving ambiguous and unhelpful feedback – "a tutor saying my essay is not 'in-depth' doesn't mean anything to me"—and difficulties in understanding the relationship between the comments and the mark received. One lecturer suggested that students sometimes did not act on feedback themselves, instead expecting the lecturer to take action to address the issue. One colleague suggested that the positioning of this after question 8 about "detailed comments on my work" added to the confusion. The speed of feedback was also important to some students, particularly ensuring that feedback was received on one assignment before another assignment for the same module was due in. One colleague reported that the speed of feedback seemed to be more important than the actual content and level of detail of the feedback.

Question 10: I have received sufficient advice and support with my studies

This is another question perceived as double-barrelled with some students and staff seeing *advice* and *support* as different. In institutions where students are allocated a personal tutor, this question was often perceived to gauge their satisfaction with the work of this individual. Many students felt that this related to both academic support and advice (e.g. choosing modules) and personal support and advice, (e.g. supporting students with illness, disability or going through difficult times), though there was little mention of support outside the department (e.g. careers advisors, librarians and counselling services). Some students also thought about feedback on work as 'advice', even though this is addressed by the previous question.

One colleague reported students seeing *advice* as face-to-face and *guidance* as being in written form, e.g. academic handbooks.

Question 15: The course is well organised and is running smoothly

Students thought about this question in two main ways. One group of students considered it to be a logistical question about room allocation, timetabling, procedural issues, handbooks and coursework deadlines (which were sometimes thought about in response to this question rather than in response to the questions about assessment and feedback).

Other students thought about this question in relation to the organisational skills of individual lecturers; for example, did they make their reading lists available online, or did they make their PowerPoint slides available before the lecture?

One lecturer saw this question as another example of assuming student passivity. The focus

is on staff making things run smoothly rather than students taking responsibility for themselves. One student responded succinctly, "the organisation could be better, but after going to French and Spanish universities for the Year Abroad, you realise it's actually really well organised!"

Staff raised uncertainty about whether the 'course' here was deemed to mean at the programme level or at the module level. The management of Virtual Learning Environments, IT support and the Year Abroad were also mentioned by teaching staff.

Question 16: The library resources and services are good enough for my needs

Perhaps the least confusing question we examined, with many students and staff believing that the question was straightforward. Even so, lots of issues emerged in individual departmental contexts. There was some confusion about whether students thought of electronic materials as part of the library service. The main concern expressed by students was the availability of high demand books.

Some colleagues became aware that their students know very little about searching for journal articles and only used Google or Google scholar to find material. It was also noted in a couple of cases that students had not had any introduction to the library on arrival at university and in one institution students found the library intimidating. At another institution different programmes within the same department had satisfaction scores ranging from 79% to 97%.

Question 19: The course has helped me to present myself with confidence.

When answering this question, many students initially thought about giving oral presentations. It was also linked to employability and interviewing skills, but the question of whether this was about personal confidence or academic confidence was unclear. And where students reported an increase in confidence, was this down to the skills their course had given them, their year abroad, their work placements, or was it just part of being four years older?

One member of staff observed that the NSS is carried out at a time where students are at their most anxious, perhaps looking for work, perhaps worried about the future. In languages it was suggested that this question might be thought about in the context of L2 competence or confidence in dealing with people from other cultures. "It's a bit of a weird question" said one student. "It really wants you to say 'yes', because if you say 'no', you're saying something bad about yourself.

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Question 22: Overall, I am satisfied with the quality of the course

As for other questions, students reported a bias towards thinking about their more recent experience. The word 'quality' was seen as problematic, but students tended to answer the question in terms of whether they enjoyed their course or thought it a worthwhile experience. The term 'course' was seen as problematic in itself – does the word course refer to modules, programmes, half-programmes?

This question was a particular challenge for joint honours students who may have had very different experiences of each subject – "I'd give a different answer to all of the questions, including this one, for different parts of the degree (Language 1 and Language 2)" reported one student.

Both staff and students recognised this as a 'summary' question. Many staff attempted to re-write this question in a way which they thought might better convey the perceived intent of the questions. Would you recommend this course to a friend? Overall, do you think that going to university was beneficial? Was going to university worth it?
One student succinctly opined: "No one knows what the question means, but everyone can recognise that the responses will be used to make the university look better".

Methodological issues

Staff and students alike expressed concerns about the reliability and validity of the NSS due to the vagueness and ambiguity of the questions. Double-barrelled questions were a particular problem (e.g. questions 5, 6, 10). Virtually all the project leaders called for a widescale revision of the questions to make the NSS more useful for quality enhancement. However, a recent review of the NSS did not recommend any changes: "We conclude that the core NSS should remain as it is for the present, with its continuing usefulness and relevance being the subject of annual consideration by the HEPISG [Higher Education Public Information Steering Group]." [6] it is likely therefore that the existing questions will not be changed for a least a few years.

Staff and students also expressed surprise that selecting 'neither agree nor disagree' is considered a negative rather than a neutral answer when used in unistats[7], newspaper league tables and the proposed KIS. One institution advises:

If you think that overall the course was very good, even if there were one or two bad experiences, you should not feel shy about using `5´s (or `1´s for that matter). Similarly if a question is not relevant simply mark it NA rather than giving it a `3´.[8]

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[6] Paul Ramsden et al *Enhancing and Developing the National Student Survey. Report to HEFCE by the Centre for Higher Education Studies at the Institute of Education* (London: Centre for Higher Education Studies, 2010) http://www.hefce.ac.uk/pubs/rdreports/2010/rd12_10/rd12_10a.pdf
[7] http://www.unistats.com
[8] University of Sheffield http://www.sheffield.ac.uk/is/current/nss.html

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Several reports mentioned that the tenor of the questions seemed to have been written with an expectation of student passivity, as if the students had little or no influence on their own experiences, e.g. *Staff* have made the subject interesting, Feedback on my work *[from staff]* has helped me clarify things I did not understand. I have *received [from staff]* detailed comments on my work.

Conclusions

This project provided a rationale for colleagues to focus on the NSS and to open up dialogue between staff colleagues and between staff and students. The increased importance (or at least the perceived increased importance) of the NSS in informing student choice means that it is more important than ever to understand how the questions are interpreted by students filling in the survey. With reports of low scoring programmes being closed down in some institutions the need for teaching staff to get to grips with the NSS is critical for survival in some cases.

Although not without methodological problems, inclusion and participation in the NSS is considered to be desirable by senior managers and department colleagues alike. In some institutions the worst outcome for a department was not low scores per se, but a failure to reach the response rates required for a score to be published.

Assessment and feedback is a particularly problematic topic for both students and staff. Students often found the criteria for assessment ambiguous or unhelpful and staff continue to be unsure about what students felt they needed in this area.

Colleagues also felt that rephrasing some of the questions could make the NSS more useful for the enhancement of teaching quality.

Actions

Colleagues found participation in the project valuable. In the words of one colleague, the interviews with students seemed to confirm existing suspicions, but also highlight new areas of strength and weakness. The opportunity for discussion with staff and students was greatly valued.

Actions colleagues will take or will recommend to Heads of Departments and/or senior managers at the nine institutions include:

1. Using the NSS questions on first and second year questionnaires.
2. Encouraging students to make more use of timetabled advice and guidance sessions.

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3. Providing a more comprehensive introduction to the library resources. One colleague plans to recommend making library sessions obligatory.

4. Informing Level 2 students about previous actions taken in response to the NSS.

5. Discussing ways in which the NSS can feed into broader staff development, including courses for early career teaching staff.

6. Promoting more staff use of discussion boards in the institution's VLE as a means of providing feedback.

7. Encouraging tutors on skills modules to put more emphasis on transferable skills.

8. Developing a better understanding between staff and students of staff availability.

9. Communicating assessment criteria more clearly in order to relieve pressure on office hours.

10. Harmonising teaching and assessment for different languages. Where there are exceptions a case should be made to the students.

11. Fostering a 'personal tutoring' culture in the department.

12. Promoting awareness to students of the importance of the NSS.

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Appendix 1: Background to the project.

During the academic year 2010-11 the Higher Education Academy set the National Student Survey as a key strategic priority. Informal conversations between staff in the Subject Centre for Languages, Linguistics and Area Studies (LLAS) revealed that colleagues in the sector were being asked by their senior management to 'respond' to the NSS, especially if their scores were considered to be unsatisfactory. They also expressed concerns about the way in which some of the questions were worded and many were unsure how students understood the questions.

In response LLAS decided to offer a small amount of funding for ten departments for carry out interviews and focus groups with students and teaching staff, with a particular focus on the eight questions addressed in this report. Each department then wrote an individual report which was submitted to LLAS. Although the individual reports are confidential, this report is intended to be a summary of the salient issues which arose from these discussions. The colleagues involved in the project have identified a set of actions appropriate to their own departmental context.

The following departments took part in the project:

English, Linguistics and Communication, University of the West of England (Michael Daller, Liz Falconer, Jeanette Sakel and Jeanine Treffers-Daller).

English Language, Middlesex University (Billy Clark, Clare O'Donoghue and Sylvia Shaw)

Slavonic Studies, University of Glasgow (Jan Čulík and Maragret Tejerizo)

English, Communication and Philosophy, Cardiff University (Christopher Heffer)

European Studies, Cardiff University (Marie Gastinel-Jones)

Modern Languages, University of Southampton (James Minney and Adrian Sewell)

Linguistics and Phonetics, University of Leeds (Ruth Payne-Woolridge)

Language and Linguistic Science, University of York (Sam Hellmuth)

Sussex Centre for Language Studies, University of Sussex (Rachel Cole and Simon Williams)

Language and Linguistics, University of East London (John Gray)

Appendix 2: National Student Survey questions

These are the 22 questions asked by the NSS. Generally speaking the lowest satisfaction ratings are found in the areas of assessment and feedback, with higher ratings in the areas of teaching on the course and overall student satisfaction. To each question students can answer: N/A (Not applicable), 1. Definitely disagree, 2. Mostly disagree, 3 . Neither agree nor disagree, 4. Mostly agree, 5. Definitely agree

Overall satisfaction	
Q22	Overall, I am satisfied with the quality of the course.
The teaching on my course	
Q4	The course is intellectually stimulating.
Q3	Staff are enthusiastic about what they are teaching.
Q1	Staff are good at explaining things.
Q2	Staff have made the subject interesting.
Assessment and feedback	
Q9	Feedback on my work has helped me clarify things I did not understand.
Q8	I have received detailed comments on my work.
Q6	Assessment arrangements and marking have been fair.
Q5	The criteria used in marking have been clear in advance.
Q7	Feedback on my work has been prompt.
Academic support	
Q11	I have been able to contact staff when I needed to.
Q12	Good advice was available when I needed to make study choices.
Q10	I have received sufficient advice and support with my studies.
Organisation and management	
Q15	The course is well organised and is running smoothly.
Q13	The timetable works efficiently as far as my activities are concerned.
Q14	Any changes in the course or teaching have been communicated effectively.
Learning resources	
Q18	I have been able to access specialised equipment, facilities or room when I needed to.
Q17	I have been able to access general IT resources when I needed to.
Q16	The library resources and services are good enough for my needs.
Personal development	
Q21	As a result of the course, I feel confident in tackling unfamiliar problems.
Q20	My communication skills have improved.
Q19	The course has helped me present myself with confidence.

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