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Hit by a perfect storm? Art & Design in the National Student Survey

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There has long been the suspicion amongst staff in Art & Design that the ratings given to their subject disciplines in the UK's National Student Survey are adversely affected by a combination of circumstances – a 'perfect storm'. The 'perfect storm' proposition is tested by comparing ratings for Art & Design with those for a selection of other subjects chosen because they share some features that might lead to lower ratings on the survey. Data from a small-scale qualitative study are used to throw light on what might lie behind the sector-wide statistics. The comparisons suggest that there is some validity in the 'perfect storm' proposition. More broadly, the article points to the need for sophistication in interpreting findings from the survey, irrespective of the subject area.

Keywords: Art & Design; National Student Survey; subject comparisons; quantitative analysis; qualitative data

Surveys of teaching and learning

The Course Experience Questionnaire (CEQ) in Australia and the National Student Survey (NSS) in the UK each seek to provide indications of aspects of 'the student experience', the CEQ surveying recent graduates and the NSS students in their final undergraduate year. These two instruments have a similar format which is dominated by a set of statements with an invitation to respondents to indicate their level of agreement or disagreement. Both instruments have as a major aim the provision of information to intending students, and their findings are summarised in various publishers' guides to choosing a course and/or university. An alternative survey approach, focusing more directly on what students do (and hence their levels of engagement with their studies) has been taken in the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) in the USA and the Australasian Survey of Student Engagement (AUSSE). Neither of these engagement-oriented instruments produces data that encompass the totality of institutions in the way that the CEQ and NSS do, and hence sector-wide comparative statistics are unavailable. This article focuses on a statistical comparison of the outcomes of the NSS in subjects in the field of Art & Design with those generated in a selection of other subject areas. Recently, analyses of NSS data have focused on the variance between subject areas in broadly homogeneous groups and on the variance between institutions in respect of separate subject disciplines (see the slew of analyses of 2011 NSS data produced by the Higher Education Academy<sup>1</sup>). Comparisons across

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Studies in Higher Education 1789 heterogeneous subject areas, based on a sample of similar institutions break new

ground, and are undertaken in this article.

The National Student Survey

The current NSS consists of 23 core statements<sup>2</sup> (commonly but inaccurately termed 'questions') relating to aspects of 'the student experience', together with optional statements and open response questions that are not considered in this article since these are intended to inform institutions rather than the general public. The 22 core statements focusing on teaching and learning (the 23rd relates to the students' union, and is not considered here) are statistically 'collapsed' into six scales, plus a separate statement focusing on overall satisfaction (Table 1).

Ratings in respect of eight statements from the NSS are included in Key Information Sets whose purpose is to inform prospective students when choosing programme and institution in the UK.<sup>3</sup> The multi-statement scales have been shown to be statistically robust, although Marsh and Cheng (2008) pointed to the possibility of a subdivision of the Assessment & Feedback scale (however, this has not been taken up).

Intending students can use NSS data to help them choose an institution (and, if they are determined to engage with the detailed statistics available, a course). 'Caterpillar plots', such as those in Vaughan and Yorke (2009) and in HEA (2012), indicate that within a particular discipline area some institutions receive markedly higher ratings than others: however, the bulk of institutions in the middle are statistically indistinguishable. Intending students will broadly be comparing like with like: they will not be interested in how an institution's NSS results for Art & Design compare

with those in, say, Law. The same should apply to institutional managers since – as is apparent from the data presented below – the NSS appears to suit some subject areas more than others. However, Cheng and Marsh (2010, 708) remark that some managers have compared NSS scores across subject areas without factoring in the variance between subject disciplines, and there is anecdotal evidence of managers taking groups of staff to task for NSS scores that appear comparatively weak but are actually in the mainstream for their discipline area. Whilst professionals should, as a matter of course, continually seek to ensure that their practice is of as high a standard as possible, management that is not statistically sophisticated could compromise staff commitment.

There is a further point. Institutional managers are understandably sensitive to their institution's position in 'league tables' or rankings. If an institution has a high proportion of students in subjects that receive relatively low ratings in the NSS, its

Table 1. The six scales and overall satisfaction statement in the National Student Survey.  
Scale

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

Personal Development Overall Satisfaction

Number of statements

4 5 3 3 3 1

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overall rating on the instrument will be proportionately compromised.4 Staff in a subject area where NSS scores are relatively weak will feel the institutional pressure.

Subject differences in responses to the NSS

In his report *Dimensions of quality* Gibbs (2010) drew on evidence to point out that differences inherent in subject areas would be reflected in the outcomes of instruments intended to span the spectrum of subjects: the NSS is one such instrument. Gibbs is worth quoting at some length on the point:

The Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching established a large-scale initiative on the assumption that the pedagogies of disciplines are different: that, for example, educational quality is achieved through different strategies and practices in the creative arts than in the sciences, and differently in English than in Law [...]. At a sufficient level of abstraction there are similar underpinning educational principles across all disciplines ..., but they are embodied in such varied educational practices, and are salient to such different extents in different disciplines, that disciplines in effect achieve educational quality in different ways. If you then attempt to measure quality across disciplines, for example by using the Course Experience Questionnaire, you find that some disciplines emerge consistently better than others, across different studies and different institutions. Either one has to accept that certain subjects are always taught less well than others, which seems highly unlikely, or that different measures of quality are better aligned with the consequences of some (disciplinary) pedagogic practices than with others. [...] Comparing quality between disciplines is fraught with difficulties. (Gibbs 2010, 46)

In a review of the NSS, Ramsden et al. (2010) echoed the last point in the above quotation, for which SurrIDGE (2008 and also in earlier reports), Marsh and Cheng (2008), Williams and Kane (2008), and Fielding, Dunleavy and Langan (2010) have provided empirical evidence. Part of the difficulty with comparing subject disciplines stems from differences in the pedagogic cultures of 'academic tribes' (Becher and Trowler 2001), and hence differences of 'fit' of practices with the issues probed by the NSS.

The development of a short survey instrument of wide applicability necessarily leads to the exclusion of matters that particular groups of students might see as salient – there are hints that this might be the case in the account of the development of the NSS (Richardson, Slater and Wilson 2007), and Ashby, Richardson and Woodley (2011) have shown that distance-learning students find difficulty with some parts of the NSS. The inclusion in the NSS of a bank of optional items has the potential to overcome some objections of this kind, but success in this respect depends on the items from the bank the institution opts to include. Greater success (though limited to within-institution analyses because of confidentiality) may be found through analyses of the responses to the open-answer items.

Analyses of the NSS (as with its Australian precursor, the Course Experience Questionnaire) have tended to concentrate on psychometric properties (e.g. Marsh and Cheng 2008). Harvey (2008) criticised the NSS from a conceptual standpoint, arguing that statistical reliability should not be substituted for validity, and Yorke (2009) pointed to a number of social-psychological influences on responding to surveys. Rather less attention has been given to what students take the NSS statements to be addressing, and how they respond to the challenge of generalising across a whole programme of study (both being aspects of validity). Canning's (2011) report focusing on languages and linguistics exemplifies the student perspective on aspects of the NSS.

As noted above, there have been warnings about comparing NSS ratings across subjects, so why is it still necessary to focus on a comparison of subject disciplines? Two answers come quickly to mind.

(1) Not everyone who draws upon NSS outcomes is aware of the need to take into account differences between subjects. Simplistic comparisons are inadequate for good institutional management. League tables (rankings) of institutions – especially those that coalesce NSS ratings from all the subject areas – implicitly treat differences between subject areas as being of little consequence. There continues to be a need to show, to those who may lack a sophisticated understanding of NSS statistics, that the interpretation of NSS outcomes demands subtlety and sensitivity.

(2) There may not be a close alignment between what the designers of the NSS had in mind when constructing the instrument and how students respond to items – hence the NSS outcomes may be less informative (especially to intending students) than might be supposed.

This article focuses on subject disciplinary differences in the NSS, and in particular on whether ratings received by Art & Design are indicative of a disadvantage that stems from the nature of the instrument. Although the variance within a subject discipline (why some institutions receive markedly higher ratings than others, for example) is of interest in itself, and is well captured in HEA (2012) and cognate reports for other subject disciplines, it is not addressed here.

Why focus on Art & Design?

When completing the NSS, students in Art & Design tend to give lower ratings than do students in other subject groups – particularly so in respect of the organisation and management of programmes. This weakness led to a study, undertaken by Vaughan and Yorke (2009), of NSS data and how providers of programmes in Art & Design were responding to NSS outcomes. Using the data available at that time, the findings of this study included the following.

- . Some institutions had received much stronger ratings on the NSS than did others, particularly in relation to Organisation & Management.
- . Of 22 selected subjects, Cinematics & Photography, Design Studies and Fine Art were the three that were rated lowest for Overall Satisfaction, and these three were towards the lower end of the list of subjects in respect of Teaching & Learning, Academic Support, Organisation & Management, and Personal Development. In contrast, these three subjects were in the middle of the list for Assessment & Feedback and Learning Resources.
- . Focus group discussion with key institutional personnel indicated that the NSS had forced the sector to improve provision and to think about aspects of provision that had not previously been addressed.

Vaughan and Yorke also observed that, whilst the NSS had its weaknesses and was not ideal for subjects such as Art & Design, it was going to remain a feature of higher education in the UK and hence the Art & Design sector was obliged to come to terms with it.

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There has been a longstanding belief in the Art & Design subject area that the NSS statements fail adequately to capture key aspects of the student experience – for example, the greater emphasis on practice than in, say, the humanities and social sciences; the very limited use made of 'transmission' approaches to teaching; and the flexibility inherent in curricula in which self-generated activity is normally expected. A further issue, which bears on ratings covering both academic support and the organisation and management of programmes, is the use made of practising artists and designers as part-time teachers who – self-evidently – are not as available to students as full-time teachers. The question that has arisen within the group of subjects within Art & Design is whether their subjects are uniquely disadvantaged in respect of the NSS because the

design and implementation of their curricula are inadequately reflected in the NSS: are they being hit by a 'perfect storm' of adverse conditions?

The 'perfect storm' proposition can be tested by comparing NSS scores for Art & Design with those from a selection of other subjects that have one or more features in common. A small-scale qualitative study by Blair, Orr and Yorke (2012) provides additional illumination to the comparison.

#### Method

Data from the 2012 administration of the NSS that related to full-time students studying for first degrees in post-1992 universities were used for the comparisons. The selected institutions offered studio-based programmes in Art & Design, since programmes such as History of Art – if the only ones on offer – would be closer in pedagogic style to a humanities programme like History. Pre-1992 universities were excluded since, although a small number offer studio-based programmes, the comparisons involving other subjects would be distorted more by the inclusion of these universities' NSS scores than by their exclusion. Specialist institutions focusing on the creative and performance arts were also excluded because they offer few of the selected comparator subjects. Restricting the comparisons to post-1992 universities offers the best opportunity for comparing like with like – a matter of critical importance where comparisons on the basis of subject discipline are concerned. The level of disaggregation of subjects, as specified by the Joint Academic Coding System [JACS],<sup>5</sup> was that of the broad subject area which provided substantial numbers of responses, although at the cost of not distinguishing between programme areas (e.g. Graphic Design from Clothing/Fashion Design within the broad category of Design Studies).

The selected comparator subject areas are given in Table 2, together with a brief indication of why subject areas not in creative and performance arts were chosen. The employment of part-time academic staff cannot readily be mapped on to the subjects at the chosen level of JACS, nor on to the institutions sampled in this article; however, statistics from the Higher Education Statistics Agency regarding the higher education sector as a whole (HESA 2012) are strongly indicative of the importance of part-time staff in the teaching of Art & Design and Performance Arts (in Table 3 these subject areas cannot be disaggregated).

Architecture is not included in the analysis presented here because it is categorised in JACS not under the broad heading of Creative Arts & Design but under that of Architecture, Building & Planning.

Mean NSS data for the selected subjects, weighted by the number of respondents per institution, are given in Table 4a. The means conceal wide variations between

Table 2. Subjects used in the comparisons. Subject area  
Comment

Highly practical, and involving considerable staff/student contact

Involving creativity, but in words rather than other media

Involving specialist equipment, and widely offered by post-1992 universities

'Academic' nature, plus involving above-average proportion of part-time staff

Tendency to involve above average proportion of part-time staff

Classical 'academic' subject, widely offered in the sampled institutions

Table 3.

Performance Arts. Source: HESA (2012, Table 15).

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Fine Art

Design

Cinematics and Photography

Others in Creative Arts and Design

Nursing

Imaginative Writing Biology

Law

Business Studies History

Music Drama Dance

An illustration of the importance of part-time staff in the teaching of Art & Design and

Broad subject area

Nursing & Paramedical studies Biosciences

Business & Management studies Humanities & Language based studies Design & Creative Arts

Full-time, n 6505

9460  
 8680  
 6900  
 4760  
 Part-time, n 2800  
 2395  
 4735  
 4760  
 9300

Total, n 9305  
 11855  
 13415  
 11665  
 14060

% part-time  
 30 20 35 41 66

institutions, as is evident from the 'caterpillar plots' included in sector-wide analyses (HEA 2012); however, the purpose of the present study is to make comparisons relating to subject areas rather than institutions. A comparison based on whole sector data produced by the Higher Education Academy from the NSS administration in 2011 showed a very similar pattern (Table 4b), even without ensuring equivalence of the institutions sampled.

#### Comparisons across subjects

##### Academic nature

With the exception of the set of statements related to resources (Statements 16–18), History was the most positively rated of the selected subject areas (the slight superiority over English had previously been reported by the History Subject Centre of the Higher

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Tables 4a and 4b. Mean percentage agreement with the 22 core NSS statements, for the selected subjects. The higher the percentage agreement, the more positive the response. Table 4a:

Selected post-92 universities, 2012

N institutions

Nmax Respondents

Statement Number and Focus

1 Staff good at explaining

2 Staff make subject interesting

3 Staff enthusiastic

4 Subject intellectually stimulating

5 Clear assessment criteria

6 Assessment arrangements fair

7 Prompt feedback

8 Detailed comments

9 Clarify things not understood

10 Advice and support

11 Contact staff when needed

12 Advice for study choices

13 Timetable effective

14 Effective communication of changes 15 Course organisation

16 Library

17 General information tech. resources 18 Specialist equipment

19 Present with confidence

20 Communication skills

21 Tackling unfamiliar problems

22 Overall satisfaction

Fine Art 45

53 44

7238 2622

OtherAD Music Drama 12 34 45 435 1899 2298

Dance Nurs 22 43 867 4743  
Imag Wr Biol Law 25 27 53 965 1384 5533  
Bus St Hist 52 44 7671 2308

1908

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66 64

59 56

81 82

82 84

72 76

76 73

81 78

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81 87 87 75 82 87 83 87 89 73 72 83 66 71 71 72 67 69 63 56 62 73 69 78 63 62 69 73 75 79 75  
79 83 71 74 79 75 76 80 64 66 68 54 60 63 81 79 78 82 82 82 71 73 69 74 74 86 77 76 86 74 73  
84 68 74 82

90 89 87 84 92 88 86 85 76 80 67 74 64 68 77 71 69 63 80 79 85 81 80 78 80 69 72 61 72 59 76  
86 84 88 72 81 81 87 85 91 81 88 83 84

91 92 91 87 84 80 88 88 84 79 87 87 73 76 76 78 77 75 67 58 65 77 5683 69 71 59 62 81 78 74  
85 84 82 75 73 71 81 80 79 71 80 77 71 78 78 78 82 78 80 80 84 74 79 76 80 77 81 82 80 85 75  
79 82 83 87 86

87 95 73 91 78 93 75 91 77 78 72 84 60 71

Art & Design Design Cine & P

Performance Arts

6600 82 57 73 72 82 81 88 68 78 76 86 76 82 76 85 85 69 84 78 77 71 82 82 86 85 81 82 82 90

(Continued .)

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Table 4. (Continued.)

Table 4b: Whole sector, 2011

Nmax Respondents 3217 10678

3125 1573 82 81 78 80 81 85 72 78 71 72 72 71 62 67 73 76 65 68 71 74 77 76 70 72 70 72 61 62  
57 60 82 83 84 82 74 72 73 78 76 80 71 77 72 75

3262 3868 88 87 84 86 88 88 78 81 69 67 70 66 58 85 71 73 62 65 77 76 84 81 76 77 78 75 67 64  
62 58 79 72 84 79 74 66 76 82 76 84 73 81 77 79

730 15230 913 90 89 88 87 84 85 92 87 88 84 85 80 72 77 70 60 72 74 59 70 67 76 72 75 69 65  
67 81 77 76 85 78 82 77 75 70 78 66 76 67 59 68 65 57 65 81 86 75 84 89 77 71 79 69 81 87 76

84 91 76 78 87 70 83 83 80

4022 11666 12625 92 91 86 85 81 73 88 85 78 90 89 76 69 71 77 74 74 73 54 63 58 56 64 61 54  
59 57 76 71 72 86 83 81 73 70 68 82 81 78 79 77 75 80 80 75 82 80 83 83 84 84 78 76 76 78 80

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10104

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1 Staff good at explaining 83 2 Staff make subject interesting 82 3 Staff enthusiastic 86 4 Subject  
intellectually stimulating 81 5 Clear assessment criteria 71 6 Assessment arrangements fair 73 7  
Prompt feedback 73 8 Detailed comments 78 9 Clarify things not understood 74 10 Advice and  
support 73 11 Contact staff when needed 76 12 Advice for study choices 73 13 Timetable effective  
76 14 Effective communication of changes 65 15 Course organisation 63 16 Library 84 17 General  
information tech. resources 83 18 Specialist equipment 75 19 Present with confidence 79 20  
Communication skills 80 21 Tackling unfamiliar problems 76 22 Overall satisfaction 77

82

80

84

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75

Notes: The lowest scoring four subject areas for each NSS

item are highlighted (where percentages appear the same, differences exist at the level of decimal points).

Design = Design studies; Cine & P = Cinematics Biol = Biology; Bus St = Business Studies; Hist and Photography; OtherAD = Others in Creative Arts and Design; Nurs = Nursing; Imag Wr = Imaginative Writing; = History.

Sources for data in Table 4b: see Note 1.

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Education Academy: see Cronberg n.d.). The Art & Design subject areas tended to be rated slightly less positively than those in Performance Arts, Biology and Law as regards the quality of teaching. As regards Assessment & Feedback, History and Fine Art tended to receive the highest ratings. The Art & Design ratings for Assessment & Feedback as a whole paralleled the earlier findings of Vaughan and Yorke (2009). In passing, the relatively weak showing by Business Studies may merit further investigation.

Practice-oriented subjects

Subjects categorised under Art & Design tended to be rated lower than others on the quality of teaching (Statements 1–4). All of the selected subjects with an orientation towards professional practice showed up relatively weakly on course organisation and the communication of changes (Statements 15, 14).

Contact with staff

In subjects where there is a greater tendency to employ part-time staff, Art & Design was rated marginally less highly than Nursing, Law, Business Studies and Performance Arts: with the exception of the last, the difference might be connected with the relatively weak ratings given in respect of course organisation and management.

Specialist equipment

Art & Design received ratings roughly equal to those given to the comparator subjects. In Art & Design there is a greater need to hunt out and book specialist equipment that is routinely made available elsewhere (see, in relation to students' first-year experience in Art & Design, Yorke and Vaughan 2012). Access to specialist equipment is a weakness in the results for History, but it is unclear how relevant Statement 18 is for this subject discipline.

Creativity

Imaginative Writing received marginally better ratings than did the subject areas in Art & Design other than Fine Art. It tended to receive better ratings than Music, but roughly equivalent ratings for Dance and Drama.

The validity of evidence from the NSS

The NSS is an instrument that requests near-graduates to report on their experiences on their undergraduate programmes. Whilst it is open to criticism for a range of conceptual and methodological reasons (e.g. Yorke 2009; Canning 2011), these reasons are bracketed out of consideration in this article. The NSS is, to some extent, a form of student self-report in that it focuses on students' perceptions of their experience in higher education. Carini, Kuh and Klein (2006), drawing on previous studies in the USA, identify six conditions under which self-reporting can be valid and reliable. These conditions provide a framework for the discussion that follows. The qualitative studies by Blair, Orr and Yorke (2012) and Canning (2011), coupled with Eley's

(2001) earlier observations regarding students' responding to the Course Experience Questionnaire, suggest that a number of the conditions may not be met, and perhaps a fortiori in the case of Art & Design.

Studies in Higher Education 1797 Condition 1: respondents know the information requested  
Whilst respondents might know the information, the next issue is really whether the statement actually elicits it. Statements 1 and 4 of the NSS each seem to have elicited from respondents something rather different from what the designers of the survey probably intended, and Statement 9 is seen by most as inappropriate to their programmes.

Statement 1: 'Staff are good at explaining things'

There was a high level of consistency amongst the 12 respondents that 'explaining things' related to the structure of the curriculum and/or to procedural arrangements. The quotations<sup>6</sup> from interviews that are incorporated here, and elsewhere in this article, are all drawn from the study conducted by Blair, Orr and Yorke (2012) involving six students following various programmes in Art & Design in each of two post-1992 universities (here coded A and B).

... what did you take the phrase 'good at explaining things' to mean? Because I was thinking about my studio tutors, it's more about explaining what we needed to do as part of the course, in order to pass the course or the project or ... I don't know. It's very vague. ... Actually on that one I was thinking about when [name] talks to us about the course structure breakdown quite a lot, and that's what I understand it. So it's more to do with the structure of the course rather than the detailed information about the work.

Yes.

A respondent from University B said much the same:

Interviewer: Respondent A2:

Interviewer: Respondent A2:

Respondent B5:

... well I was thinking, more about, like, when we have each meetings, like, erm, at the start of the week when we have the lesson with them, we go through everything we need to do that week, erm, they go through the handbook each week and where we should be at, like. I thought that was a good one that they did, because every week they get the handbook out and say, this is where we should be at, then if we ask something they go through it.

The following quotation refers to subject content – a feature that was rare in the 12 interviews.

Respondent A1: ... To me, the only things that would need explaining would maybe be theory or theoretical terms or philosophical ideas and I think from my experience those things, with lectures with [name] they've been explained well.

Statement 4: 'The course is intellectually stimulating'

Some students on degree programmes in Art & Design may fail to appreciate the intellectual base of their programme. The Quality Assurance Agency's Subject Benchmark for Art & Design (QAA 2008), to which course designers necessarily make reference, includes the words 'intellectual' or 'intellectually' 19 times, so from the provider's perspective there should be a clear intellectual intent. The quotations below suggest that the intellectual intent may not have been sufficiently well communicated or embedded

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in the programme. Alternatively, the statement simply may not have prompted the acknowledgement.

Interviewer: Respondent A3:

'The course is intellectually stimulating'. When you responded to this statement, what were you trying to tell us?

'Intellectually' threw me a bit because it's stimulating; I think it's challenging, but I don't always think it's intellectually challenging in a sort of academic sense. Intellectual to me is more academic than sort I suppose of design-based things, so that word threw me a little bit. So I guess that affected my answer slightly as well.

'Intellectually' was problematic for others:

Interviewer:

Respondent A6:

Interviewer: Respondent A6:

Interviewer: Respondent A6: Interviewer:

Respondent A6:

So the second question is 'The course is intellectually stimulating', so when you responded to this statement, what were you trying to tell the questionnaire?

That I had found the course interesting and stimulating. 'Intellectually' is a funny word to use for a design course.

Why's that?

Because it's not intellectual. It's not a sorting of books subject. But I just interpreted it as did I find it interesting.

So 'intellectual' you interpret as being a more academic ... Yes.

But would you consider the essay, contextual studies, that sort of subject area intellectual?

I completely forgot about that again, because it's something that probably took a few weeks out of the whole three years.

One respondent seems to have given a rather narrow interpretation to the word 'course', in that the learning they undertook on their own – though necessary for success on the course – was discounted:

Respondent B4:

... I don't know how to say this, but the course itself isn't intellectually stimulating, it's our reading, that we have to do, that like stimulates us intellectually. Do you know what I mean, like ... we're not actually on an art degree, we're not actually taught thing really, it's very self-directed, like they advise us and they direct us to do our own learning, surrounding an area.

Outside the creative and performance arts, the two other selected subjects with a practical element (Nursing and Biology) give rather higher ratings in respect of this statement. The reasons for this need further exploration, but it might be speculated that both embody a greater proportion of learning that is perceived as academic and hence intellectual – i.e. 'knowing that' (Ryle 1949) – than do the creative and performance arts.

Statement 9: 'Feedback on my work has helped me clarify things I did not understand'

The majority of respondents found difficulty with the notion of clarification of things not understood, in both universities. An example from University A:

Interviewer: And the next question is 'Feedback on my work has helped me clarify things I did not understand'. So, when you responded what were you trying to tell us and what was your interpretation?

Respondent A1:

Ehm, to me on this statement I took it more that feedback had helped me progress rather than clarify things that I didn't understand. [...] I answered it more that feedback on my work has helped me sort of develop as a designer rather than clarifying things that I didn't understand because that to me, again, goes back to sort of the technical help rather than the design based in the studio. And developing the thought process as a designer is how I answered the question, rather than not understanding because obviously design isn't ... there's no right answer as there would to a maths solution so it's a lot more open ended and it was the understanding that I felt the question was more asking me if the feedback had helped me progress rather than clarifying things that weren't understood.

Two examples from University B:

Interviewer: Respondent

Also Interviewer:

Respondent

Interviewer: Respondent

Interviewer: Respondent

B1:

So when you responded to that statement [Statement 9], what were you trying to tell us?

Erm [long pause] ... I don't, I think [laugh] it's a bit of a confusing question, because 'has helped me clarify things I didn't understand' maybe indicates that you're already aware of what you didn't understand, and the feedback has increased your understanding of those things. But I don't think it does mean that, does it?

Again, another feedback one. 'Feedback on my work has helped me clarify things I do not understand.' What do you take the question to mean in relation to your studies?

Erm... [long pause] I think, erm, I probably struggled with that question.

Mm ... Why? Quite interesting to know why.

Yeah. Erm, I'm looking at the first half of the question, erm, does it clarify things? – and it may well be that, you know, I've had a half a thought about a piece of work, you know, my work tends to be sort of quite complex collage of ideas, if you like, so I'm always interested to hear other people's feedback on it, because it might expose something that I didn't see in it myself, or their view of it... Mm...

... and obviously that's the nature of art, but, erm ... if somebody clarifies something in my work that I didn't understand, I suppose when I'm reading that question, I'm interpreting that as somebody telling me something about the work that I didn't know.

Mm ...

Erm, so from an art perspective, rather than a sort of right or wrong answer perspective, I suppose I've got an issue, I've got a bit of a problem with the question in that, you know, I might well have been told something I didn't know, but it might not have been something I didn't understand.

Interviewer: Respondent B2:

B2: B2:

B2:

Judging by the data in Tables 4a and 4b, Statement 9 elicits relatively weakly positive responses across the spectrum of selected subject areas. It is a matter of speculation whether the basis for the responses differs across the subjects. In, say, a science-based subject it might be that the feedback fails to point to where the student went wrong, and why, whereas the responses from Art & Design suggest that the issue being called to mind is more connected with 'feedforward'.

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Condition 2: statements are clear and unambiguous

What may be clear to the designer of the survey may not be clear to the respondent. The three NSS statements relating to feedback provide cases in point. Respondents to the qualitative study by Blair, Orr and Yorke (2012) exhibited – at least, as far as their recollections showed – that they had varied interpretations of what 'feedback' meant to them. Some illustrative examples follow. One kind of view was that feedback correlated with summative assessment which might be limited to the mark awarded ...

Interviewer: ... how do you define what feedback was?

Respondent A4: I probably would be thinking the marks we would get for each project.

... rather than anything formative:

Interviewer: Respondent B3:

Interviewer: Respondent B3:

... when you answered this question what do you think you were thinking of?

The final feedback, when you get your mark after you've done the module. I suppose I didn't really think about giving feedback of what we're doing.

So you'd think of it more as the written feedback, is that the kind of template that you get back?

Yeah, not the feedback from like ... like we'd have discussions about how according to the research ... well have you thought about looking at this, looking at that, because that's not ... I reckon that's not feedback, that's more of a personal sort of one-to-one, that's teaching, not feedback, I'd say.

Another respondent appreciated the formative aspect of feedback, but only through written (and probably summative) comment:

Respondent B6:

Interviewer:

& Linguistics:

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.

Others saw feedback in much more formative terms, dominated by oral comment.

Erm, feedback on my work, I think during the beginning of the course the feedback wasn't all that great. I think, erm, if we wanted it we'd have to ask for it rather than it being there. And we have to get it. I think it should be compulsory that we go and get our feedback. Erm, a lot of it wasn't written down and we just had to go for a little meeting and tell us about it, whereas in the third year we had

a sheet of paper printed out with our mark on and what they'd said and what they thought about it, what we could do better in our next semester.

Right. So for you, feedback, in terms of this question, did you interpret the feedback as ...

Written. How our work was ... how ... Right

... what we'd done and what could've been done to be ... better.

This perspective parallels that identified by Canning (2011, 6) in respect of Languages

Respondent B6: Interviewer: Respondent B6:

Interviewer: Respondent B5:

Interviewer:

'Feedback on my work has been prompt' – what were you thinking about when you responded to that question?

... I thought it was because, like each week they'd come in and see you and give you feedback, then they'd give it you throughout the course, it's not just like you hand in an essay at the end, you gave it throughout, like if you were in the workshop they'd come in and say oh no, I think you need to change this or you need to develop that. It wasn't just at the end where they gave you feedback like it was all the way through which we needed because obviously developing it throughout.

So for you, what was 'feedback', then? What did you take this word to mean?

Respondent B5: Mostly it was verbal.

Yet others saw feedback as occurring through more than one channel.

Interviewer: Respondent A5:

So the third question is 'feedback on my work has been prompt'. So can you tell me what you were

...

So, there were a few different ways of getting the feedback, so that was based on the verbal feedback that I'd get in a crit, which would be immediately. So it would be prompt, so I assume there'd be a time so it's a bit hard to judge on the feedback in a crit because you get that immediately, so of course it's prompt. But I was basing that on feedback where it would be written feedback that we'd have to go back and like pick up at some time.

Differences of perspective regarding feedback are not confined to Art & Design. Other subject areas, such as those in the performance arts, necessarily incorporate a high level of feedback as practical activities are undertaken. Nursing, with curricula divided between academic study and practical experience on the ward, would be an interesting subject area to research as regards students' interpretations of feedback, and how these interpretations are (or are not) captured by the NSS. One might surmise that students see feedback predominantly in terms of oral commentary during ward activities, but in terms of written comments for the more overtly academic aspects of their studies. Subjects involving laboratory practical work (represented by Biology in this article) are likely to involve ad hoc feedback relating to experimental technique, but this is likely to be discounted by students when they respond to the NSS.

However, evidence is not available to test the extent to which the reported experiences in Art & Design might be replicated in other subject areas where learning is primarily gained through some form of practice-based engagement.

Another kind of ambiguity arises when a programme contains components taught in different subject areas. The response could be different for each area, as indicated in the following example from an institution in which 'Contextual Studies' is taught separately, rather than in an integrated way.

Interviewer:

Respondent A5: Interviewer: Respondent A5:

But if they'd asked you a question about contextual studies, saying was that well organised, would it have been a different sort of answer do you think?

Oh yeah. Yeah. Completely different.

So it's very much that 80% studio-based.

Yes. It almost feels like a different Faculty. Different people. Different way of communicating.

Everything. It's totally different when it comes to contextual studies.

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Condition 2A: the statement is meaningful to the respondent

An extension to Condition 2 might go beyond clarity and ambiguity to address the meaningfulness of the statement to the respondent. Statement 15 provides an illustration – at least, for some respondents.

Statement 15: 'The course is well organised and running smoothly'

Interviewer: Respondent A1:

Condition 3:

So, when you responded to this statement, what were you trying to tell us?

I was thinking more about being on time for things. Some things are a bit up in the air, like you're not too sure what's going on until it hits you, because they only know at the beginning of the week what's going to happen during the week, and things can change all the time. So I think I was trying to say that it's almost impossible to run everything smoothly but this isn't one of those ... it's not an academic course; an academic course has set timetables and things. This course doesn't really have a set timetable. And I thought it was quite hard to answer that sort of question, because there were a lot of things going on at the same time and there's so much you're trying to cram in in such a short period of time that I can sort of forgive the tutors for either not being on time or this or that ... because many times [name] has not been on time, but that's ... we just get used to that now. I think it's quite a wasted ... yes, it is a wasted question I think. Because you don't know how to answer it really.

statements refer to recent activities

In asking students to review the whole of their programmes, the NSS fails to meet this condition.

Qualitative data indicate that some students do focus upon relatively recent experiences when responding to some statements, and that the basis of their responses is inconsistent across the survey.

And very much you're responding to the question about what was happening currently rather than maybe something that happened when you were in Level 5 or Level 4?

Yes, definitely more this level.

And did you find that for the whole questionnaire, it was your current rather than your past experience?

Respondent A3:

Respondent A2 commented similarly in relation to the issue of promptness of

Interviewer:

Respondent A3: Interviewer:

feedback ... Respondent A2:

Interviewer: Respondent A2:

... I was thinking just about current situations really, because we do get feedback quite promptly, but that wouldn't necessarily reflect the whole three years of the course. I was focusing more on my final year. Right, so did you really feel that the survey was really asking you about your current experience rather than your past experience on the course? Well, it probably ... I don't know. It's just because your current experience is more recent so it's more in your mind, and then some other that

may happen in second or third year you think less about.

Some things were a running theme, but most things were current.

... as did Respondent A5:

Respondent A5: Well I answered that based on third year because the feedback time in third year was quite different to the first and second year, and was probably worse so that's why I'd say that was how I answered that. Based

on my most recent experience. It had been worse than previously.

Respondent A2 repeated the focus on final year when discussing the level of detail of the feedback:

OK. So the next one is 'I have received detailed comments on my work'. So when you responded to that statement, again what were you trying to tell the survey about that? What did you take it to mean? I was thinking about what written feedback do we get rather than ... because if you have a tutorial, it's more kind of just conversational whereas there's not much written feedback in the third year than there is in the second and third year. Yes, I kind of ... not dismissed, but kind of forgot about the first and second year. I didn't take that into account.

Eley (2001) noted that students, when responding to the rather similar Course Experience Questionnaire administered in Australia to recent graduates, could focus on parts of their experiences that were significant to them (because of salience or recency), rather than taking a whole-course perspective. In the same general vein, Canning (2011) found a bias towards recency in experience when students in the area of languages and linguistics reported on their responding to the NSS. The recency bias illustrated in the quotations presented here is clearly not peculiar to Art & Design, and is likely to be widespread.

Condition 4: respondents think questions merit a thoughtful response

The qualitative evidence from Art & Design indicates that this is not always the case.

Interviewer: Respondent A2:

Interviewer: Respondent A2:

And the final question is 'overall I am satisfied with the quality of the course'. So when you responded to this statement [what were you] trying to put over?

It's just a very general statement so I just kind of gave a general answer. So the quality of the course ... I mean, there's so much to think about on the course you can't ... it does seem a bit silly to have one little box to tick and answer on behalf of everything. Because the course is not just one thing but many different aspects so I just kind of ... I don't know what it involved but it just kind of summarised. I just didn't give that one much thought really because it's just a general question. However, it is unlikely that Art & Design is particularly vulnerable to casualness in responding to the NSS.

Condition 5: information requested is potentially verifiable

The nature of NSS statements is such that external verification (in a strong sense) is impossible, though it may be possible to interpret responses in the light of known circumstances. The nearest one can get is to test the consistency of response across a

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reasonable number of respondents. There seems to be no reason to consider Art & Design as a special case in this regard.

Condition 6: statements do not embarrass, threaten respondents' privacy, or encourage socially desirable responses.

The NSS offers no personal threat, but an appreciation of its significance for institutions and the standing of their degrees might encourage respondents to edge at times towards positivity. On the other hand, some students might give low ratings in order to 'punish' their institution for perceived failings: the movement of Art & Design to a different building is known to have generated student dissatisfaction in more than one case, and was probably implicated in atypically low NSS ratings. However, institutional changes are not confined to Art & Design and may in any case produce only temporary blips in ratings.

Other considerations

From the point of view of comparisons between Art & Design and other subjects, not all of the findings from the quantitative and qualitative studies can be treated under the six conditions noted above.

Rating metric

The rating metric used by the respondent may not be the same as that intended by the survey designer. Consider Statement 15 ('The course is well organised and running smoothly'). Here the subjective tendency may be – as two respondents noted – to say everything has gone well unless there is evidence to the contrary. For at least some respondents, the implicit default rating for this statement is one of the 'agree' categories, whereas for other statements it is more likely to be the 'neither/nor' middle response option.

Interviewer: Respondent A6:

What would be your definition of a course being well organised? So you've already said not turning up and finding that something's been changed ...

Instead of well organised, it's not noticing that it's not organised. If that makes sense (laughs). It's when you notice that things aren't going very well planned, then I would say it's unorganised, but to be well organised you shouldn't notice.

A respondent from the second university echoed the point:

Respondent B1:

Interviewer: Respondent B1:

I think I would just say yes, it's run smoothly and it's well-organised. Because there's no massive ... cock-ups with timetabling or anything like that, you know ...

So the absence of problems, if you like ...

Yeah.

Courses that are non-homogeneous, or are perceived as such

The issue of curricular homogeneity surfaced when one respondent was discussing Statement 4:

Interviewer: Respondent A3:

Interviewer: Respondent A3:

You didn't take anything into consideration in regard to your contextual studies?...

... the only thing that instantly sprang to mind when the word intellectually came up. It is the History of Art part of the course. I mean, stimulating is the whole course because you're always having to think, but the intellectual part to me is written in academic work rather than the design-based side of it so I didn't know if it was more aimed towards that part of the course rather than actual hands-on designing and making.

Right. So how did you then interpret it when you came to do the questionnaire?

I was quite confused by then, because there was two answers to the same question in a way which is probably why it skewed my grading.

This response echoes findings by Canning (2011, 9) in respect of students on joint honours degrees:

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.

The comparisons undertaken for this article show that there are, on the basis of the institutional results sampled, some quite marked differences between subjects. However institutions are sampled, the same conclusion is highly likely to be obtained. The reasons for these differences are plausible even if hard evidence is not available. The 'message' for institutional managers and compilers of institutional 'league tables' is straightforward: when reviewing evidence from NSS ratings, they should not unthinkingly apply a common yardstick across the outcomes for the range of subjects offered but instead consider the extent to which the NSS advantages or disadvantages each subject (Marsh and Cheng 2008, 8, have commented similarly). The key to the analysis has to be the relative standing of an institution's provision against the provision of others. Analyses of NSS data by Vaughan and Yorke (2009), and of data relating to the first-year experience Yorke and Vaughan (2012), show that there is a marked variation between the performances of institutions in respect of Art & Design. Further work to identify the causes of these differences is merited.

Are the findings from the NSS echoed elsewhere?

Is the disadvantageous position of Art & Design unique to the UK? Data from the Course Experience Questionnaire administered in 2011 (Table 5) hint that it might not be. The CEQ and NSS have some similarities, though roughly cognate items are dispersed differently between the scales, making problematic comparisons using data from Graduate Careers Australia's (2012) report of the outcomes of the CEQ. The largest fields of education show that Graphic and Design Studies (the closest to Art & Design in the NSS) score comparatively weakly on Intellectual Motivation, echoing the difficulty that students in Art & Design found with 'intellectually' in the NSS. Australian students in the more practice-oriented fields (Graphic and Design Studies, Music and Nursing) achieve among the lowest ratings for Overall Satisfaction, whereas Law, History, Literature, and Biochemistry & Cell Biology perform noticeably better. The weakest scale of the NSS as far as Art & Design is concerned (Organisation

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Table 5. Scale means for selected fields of education, as derived from the 2011 administration of the Course Experience Questionnaire. Some CEQ scale means are not shown because they have no parallel with the NSS.

CEQ Scale

Good Teaching

Intellectual Motivation

Appropriate Assessment

Clear Goals and Standards  
 Student Support Learning Resources Generic Skills  
 Graduate Qualities Overall Satisfaction Item  
 Graphic &  
 Design General Studies Music Nursing Nursing Law  
 History Literature  
 Biochemistry & Cell Biology  
 70.4 86.8 40.5 60.3  
 74.9 80.8 80.9 82.4 88.0  
 70.5 68.7 61.2 76.3 82.5 85.8 50.6 59.1 40.6 55.0 58.3 62.1  
 64.9 56.7 71.6 63.9 67.4 74.4 72.9 67.5 79.6 77.2 74.2 82.8 77.1 75.5 78.1  
 63.8 57.3 78.8 88.0 84.0 89.4 30.2 61.4 67.1 56.7 58.0 67.8  
 72.7 70.1 65.4 78.7 81.6 85.9 79.4 80.2 77.9 82.4 80.0 85.0 80.2 83.0 90.2  
 75.8 90.8 62.4 64.0  
 64.2 82.5 75.3 84.1 88.1

Source: Graduate Careers Australia (2012, 11).

& Management) has no parallel in the CEQ, which further attenuates the possibility of extending the analysis of NSS data beyond the shores of the UK.

Is there, then, a perfect storm?

Returning to the main theme of this article, Art & Design is to some extent disadvantaged by the nature of the NSS, Fine Art to a lesser extent than the other subject areas in this grouping (a matter worthy of further study). This can be seen quickly in the figures given to Overall Satisfaction in Tables 4a and 4b, whose broad representativeness of the totality of student responses is supported by Marsh and Cheng (2008, 29), and in Table 6. However, the disadvantage is shared with other subjects although on a variably partial basis, with Music coming closest to Art & Design across the whole 22 core statements of the NSS. It might be objected that some weaknesses in institutional performance in the NSS are widely shared – Assessment & Feedback stand out in this respect. The point of the analyses in this article, though, is to investigate whether the confluence of apparent weaknesses is particularly strong in the case of Art & Design.

The evidence informing this article indicates that students in Art & Design respond to the NSS statements relating to teaching (Statements 1 to 4) in ways that seem markedly at variance with the presumption of that survey's designers. It is quite possible that students in Performance Arts are exhibiting a similar kind of response. This could be

Table 6. Where Art & Design appears Strength of disadvantage

High Moderate Weak Weak

to be disadvantaged by the NSS. Source of evidence

Organisation & Management, NSS Statements 14, 15 Staff contact, NSS Statement 11

Teaching, NSS Statements 1–4

Personal Development, NSS Statements 19–21

contributing to the lower positivity in reactions to this part of the NSS. Feedback (Statements 7 to 9) is problematic across the full range of subjects, in that students appear to construe it in limited and/or varied ways. The 'feedback problem' is probably exacerbated in Art & Design and in Performance Arts where the feedback may appear to the student to be a component of teaching, such as when comment is made about evolving work in a studio: there is perhaps a contrast to be made with Nursing, where comment on the student's practical capability is seen as a professional expectation. It is, however, evident from Tables 4a and 4b that Fine Art is broadly similar to History in respect of ratings for feedback, so there seems scope for further inquiry as to why Fine Art should be rated more positively than the other subjects in Art & Design. Staff contact (Statement 11) is rated, marginally but consistently, lower for subjects in Art & Design than for the comparator subjects. This may reflect not only the employment of part-time staff but also curricula in which the presence of staff has more of a responsive aspect compared with curricula that are more explicitly structured as regards teaching encounters. The availability to students of specialist equipment and facilities (Statement 18) seems to have been of little significance in subject-based comparisons.

In terms of Statements 19 and 20 in the NSS, the subjects receiving the highest ratings are those in which some form of personal presentation to, and communication with, others is a curricular

requirement. The form of that engagement differs across subjects: for Nursing, particularly interacting with staff and patients on wards; for Drama, presentation in person is a sine qua non, as it is – though in a different vein – for Business Studies; for Law, presentation is required in ‘moots’; and in History there is an expectation that students will present arguments and contribute significantly to seminar discussions. Where the focus is more on individual achievement, as is the case in Art & Design, personal development in general is perhaps less overtly encouraged in curricula.

In both Art & Design and Performance Arts, ratings for the communication of changes to the course (Statement 14) and course organisation (Statement 15) are markedly lower than for other aspects of provision covered by the NSS. This could be a consequence of curricular structures that are more like ‘shells’ within which the intended learning outcomes are addressed than curricula in which the learning activities are fairly tightly prescribed. The data suggest that Imaginative Writing may be affected similarly, but to a lesser extent. Nursing is rated roughly on a par with practice-oriented arts courses, but for this subject the problem may arise because of the division of activity between the ward and the academic institution since the curricula are professionally tightly prescribed.

So what of the ‘perfect storm’ proposition? Art & Design clearly suffers in the NSS in comparison to other subjects. However, suffering is also spread unevenly across the other subjects, with the consequence that Art & Design is less of a special case than some might prefer to believe. If Art & Design is not being hit by the ferocity of a ‘perfect storm’, it is nevertheless subject to some persistent and chilly drizzle.

A concluding comment

This study raises a question about the utility of a generic survey instrument, which cannot properly be addressed here for reasons of space. The core items include, for students on programmes funded by the National Health Service, six additional items relating the students’ experience of practice placements. The NSS, in this instance, has acknowledged that a subject-related difference should be accommodated. The data

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and discussion above implicitly point to the desirability of a greater sensitivity of the instrument to subject disciplines if it is optimally to address the needs of intending students. However, the practicalities and economics of implementing a national survey militate against catering for the particularities of subject disciplines, even though institutions’ particular interests can to some extent be addressed through their choice of additional optional items. Further, the NSS is attempting to fulfil three aims at the same time, which are not wholly compatible (rather like the uncomfortable relationship between assessment for learning and assessment for certification): the provision of information to intending students; contributing to public accountability; and support to institutional enhancement-oriented activity.

The analysis presented in this article strongly suggests that, whatever the subject interest, users of NSS outcome data need to be careful not to draw simplistic conclusions, since they are likely to be influenced by the norms and expectations of particular subject disciplines, and by students’ perceptions of what the instrument is probing.

In their review of the NSS, Ramsden et al (2010, 61) included as their Recommendation 17 the following.

We recommend a comprehensive review of the NSS ten years after its inception (i.e. in 2015). Among the features of that review should be a detailed report on responses by gender, ethnicity and disability; an analysis of which optional banks are most often used and which are seldom used; and a multi-level analysis of the complete set of data to determine the reliability and validity of the instrument for comparative purposes. We also encourage consideration, in preparation for the review, of alternative or supplementary items that might lead to future changes to the NSS. This article suggests that the scope of a comprehensive review should be widened in order to incorporate qualitative evidence relating to the extent to which the intentions of the NSS and student responses to it are aligned.

It is widely acknowledged that the first year of a programme is the most critical year for students’ adaptation to the demands of higher education and for their subsequent success (e.g. Upcraft et al. 2005; James, Krause and Jennings 2010; Yorke and Longden 2007). From the point of view of the intending student (and perhaps the enhancement-oriented institution), a survey focusing on the

first-year experience is more likely than the NSS or the CEQ to be useful – and it would be less vulnerable to distance lending enchantment (or disenchantment) to the view.

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#### Notes

1. See reports which can be accessed via <http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/nss> under the sub-heading 'Faculties and Departments' (accessed March 16, 2013).
2. Students taking some health-related programmes also respond to a few non-optional statements relating to practical experience. The 22-item questionnaire (i.e. excluding the 23rd) can be found at <http://www.ipsos-mori.com/Assets/Docs/Publications/nss-questionnaire.pdf> (accessed March 16, 2013).
3. Details can be found at <http://www.hefce.ac.uk/whatwedo/lt/publicinfo/kis/> and clicking on the tab 'What the KIS contains' (accessed March 16, 2013).
4. The 'institutional mix' of subjects influences an overall index of NSS (see Fielding, Dunleavy and Langan 2010).
5. The current JACS categories can be found at [http://www.hesa.ac.uk/dox/jacs/JACS\\_complete.pdf](http://www.hesa.ac.uk/dox/jacs/JACS_complete.pdf) (accessed March 16, 2013).
6. Some irrelevant lead-in verbiage has been excluded from the interviewers' quotations: the essence of what was said is unaltered.

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