Evaluating the student experience in art and design

Linda Drew¹ and John Last²

This paper emanates from a seminar held at the 3rd CLTAD conference in Lisbon where some questions were posed about the evaluation of the student experience. The opportunity had presented itself to ask these questions in the light of recent practice in the UK (NSS, the National Student Survey) and to compare this practice with other international practices but, furthermore, to explore what we really wanted to learn from evaluating the student experience and why.

Background
The National Student Survey was first conducted in the UK in 2005. Initial results led many to believe that the NSS showed that Art and Design students were not happy with their experience of Higher Education. But it isn’t all about satisfaction and happiness is it?

The NSS isn’t just a satisfaction survey, it is a survey of students’ experience. We want to look at students as students, not as customers or clients.

We want to use the NSS as a way of looking at the students’ experiences of their courses and the quality of their learning, and how we can improve these. That can only lead to better learning outcomes, that’s what all academics, as well as all students, want.

Dr Mike Prosser, Director of Research and Evaluation
Higher Education Academy UK

Indeed students do make judgements about the quality of the teaching and the courses they engage in. But such an interpretation is not particularly helpful in using the results to improve the students’ actual experiences of learning. If we see the results as satisfaction ratings, and use those ratings to change the way we teach and design courses to improve the ratings, it may actually be counterproductive to improving student learning experiences – and incidentally their satisfaction ratings.

Art and Design Sector involvement in NSS discussions
John Last has been the SCOP/GuildHE nominee on the National NSS Steering Group from the inception of the national discussions and development of the NSS. John presents a view strongly in favour of the principle that student feedback informs us in our educational motives and ambitions to improve learning. However, he is sceptical of the motives of the UK Government in introducing the NSS, seeing it as more about providing data to support a market-led HE sector than about improving the student learning experience. John’s position, in chorus with GLAD, is not in favour of arts, design and media ‘special pleading’ in the context of the NSS, but rather about researching the real messages of the survey for the subjects.

As part of the trade-off for no further detailed ‘Subject Review’ activities with QAA, the NSS is seen as a key part of a package of enhancement measures in UK HE. Hence there has been strong government pressure for its initial establishment and continued operation. It is likely to be developed further on the lines of its most famous predecessor, the Course Experience Questionnaire, an Australian model (CEQ).

¹ University of the Arts London
² Arts Institute at Bournemouth
Art and Design Sector concerns

There have been qualitative differences in the student experience in art and design nationally. How are these expressed in the NSS?

‘Art and Design’ and ‘other Creative Arts’, ‘Performing Arts’, (all of which are in JACS Code W), all did less well than most subjects overall in both 2005 and 2006 (although Performing Arts did marginally better). The similarly ‘poor’ subjects were:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Subject</th>
<th>Score</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Technology</td>
<td>3.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Media Studies</td>
<td>3.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Art &amp; Design</td>
<td>3.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>OCA</td>
<td>3.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Performing Arts</td>
<td>3.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(2006: based on Q22 median score, scored on a scale of 1-5)

The press identified creative arts and design as the ‘worst’ subject area and, by association, the specialist arts, design and media institutions became the ‘worst’ HEIs in consequence. The overall table of results generally supports this assumption except that those that did well included conservatoires, dance and drama HEIs, some smaller specialist ADM HEIs and the specialist agricultural HEIs.

Other trends that should be noted are higher satisfaction with the quality of teaching in ‘older’ more established universities (less likely to offer A&D subjects) and some small specialist institutions (e.g. conservatoires as previously mentioned). There appears to be lower satisfaction with the quality of teaching in new universities and some specialist institutions. A high correlation can be observed in dissatisfaction terms with those institutions in metropolitan areas and large cities (e.g. SOAS, University of the Arts, London Metropolitan). Overall, students with dyslexia were also more likely to be less satisfied than other groups.

International Context

Other National instruments exist as mentioned briefly before. The Course Experience Questionnaire (Ramsden, 1991) or CEQ, is used as the national instrument in Australia. The National Survey of Student Engagement, NSSE is used as the national instrument in US (although it is not expressly used by all institutions). The National Student Survey (2005), NSS is used as the national instrument in UK (although not all institutions make a return as they did not meet the threshold for percentage returns).

Research Context

What do these instruments measure? They evaluate the student experience of learning at university they seek to find aspects related to the quality of learning (e.g. engagement, not simply ‘satisfaction’). Simply put, higher scores in each aspect of the student experience can be equated with a higher quality of learning outcome and deeper approaches to learning.

Can this vast claim be substantiated?

Over 30 years of research into the way students learn in higher education have shown that a much more productive way of interpreting such results is as indicators of student experiences of the context in which their teaching and learning occur. The way students experience their teaching is a complex interaction between their previous experiences of teaching and learning, their present life experiences, and the way we design and teach our courses. That is, students on a course experience the same teaching and the same course,
but they experience them in different ways. Becoming aware of those differences, and trying to understand them, is the key to improving students’ experiences of learning. (Prosser, 2005)

The Course Experience Questionnaire (Ramsden, 1991) concentrates on students’ perceptions of their learning situation, particularly:

- Prior experiences of learning
- Prior conceptual understandings
- Prior understandings of the nature of the subject matter
- Successful prior approaches to learning.

The research context which led to the development of the CEQ helps us to understand that students adopt approaches to study consistent with their perceptions, resulting in variation in the quality of learning outcomes. What follows are some examples of items from the original instrument:

**Scales of the Course Experience Questionnaire** (Ramsden, 1991)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Scale</th>
<th>Example of Item</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Good teaching</td>
<td>Teaching staff here normally give helpful feedback on how you are going</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clear goals</td>
<td>You usually have a clear idea of where you’re going and what’s expected of you in this course</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appropriate workload</td>
<td>The sheer volume of work to get through in this course means you can’t comprehend it all thoroughly (negatively scored)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appropriate assessment</td>
<td>Staff here seem more interested in testing what we have memorised than what we have understood (negatively scored)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emphasis on independence</td>
<td>Students here are given a lot of choice in the work they have to do</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Research outcomes**

Deep approaches to study are associated with perceptions that teaching is good, goals clear and there is an emphasis on independence. Surface approaches to study are associated with perceptions that workload is too high and there is inappropriate assessment (Ramsden, 1991; Wilson, Lizzio, & Ramsden, 1997). This is consistent with other relational research findings (e.g. Trigwell and Prosser, 1999) and analyses of the instrument in use in other contexts in Britain (Richardson, 1994). **What next?**

The Higher Education Academy was asked by the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) to suggest and pilot new groups of questions which were used for the first time in the online part of the survey in 2006. Validity testing of these new questions, which relate to the 'learning community' and 'intellectual motivation' has taken place. They are also developing some optional extra questions in a 'question bank' from which higher education institutions (HEIs) can select questions for use in the 2007 online survey.

**What can we learn?**

What do these results tell us about:

- Students’ prior experiences before coming to study art and design?
- The quality of learning outcomes in our courses? (what students do and perceive)
• How do we evaluate the educational practices (what we do) which form the climate of the student experience?

To answer some of these questions we observed what other institutions were doing to learn about their student experiences.

The Student Course Experience Questionnaire (SCEQ - University of Sydney) is a survey of enrolled students, it provides academic staff and academic managers with a timelier indicator of teaching and learning quality. This approach to teaching quality assurance is now being taken by a number of Australian and UK universities. Deriving from the CEQ scales, the core SCEQ scales ask students about their perceptions of:

Good Teaching; Clear Goals and Standards; Appropriate Assessment; Appropriate Workload; Generic Skills; and Overall Satisfaction with Degree Quality.

The SCEQ also seeks evidence of alignment with perception of these items and institutional strategic priorities e.g. intellectual motivation, learning community, learning resources, supportiveness of the degree course administration, and benefits of contact with active researchers.

What we might want to know is how do these things relate, for example, to other strategic priorities such as research-led-teaching, employability, e-learning and the learning environment?

Further discussion
Overall we have learnt that UK HE is shown well in NSS. But, and it’s a puzzling factor, there may be cultural reasons why specialist art, design and media (ADM) HEIs do less well although many other specialist HEIs in music and drama fare adequately and even well.

There is no evidence to point to art, design and media students not understanding the lexicon of the NSS any more than say students of music or dance. However, there is evidence that ‘organisation and management’ questions deeply affect the student experience scores overall and this may indeed be a cultural issue. It can be noted that dyslexic and Asian students are less happy overall in ADM. Why should this be a factor?

There is clear evidence that the sector is now trying to actively manage the NSS process and much use and encouragement of on-line returns is being made by using HEI email to remind and encourage students to respond. There is no evidence that offering prizes to students alters the satisfaction rate, but it can boost the response rate. Several HEIs who score in the top quartile on Q22 stress the need to manage student expectations carefully and to inform students how the HEI has responded to the previous year’s surveys and issues. The complementary work on the first year experience conducted by Mantz Yorke (2007) has findings that mirror the NSS in several aspects with the key exception that ADM students are as happy as other subject areas in year one. As well as considering the cultures of our ADM HEIs and looking at how they manage student expectation, we should also question what happens over the second and third years of their undergraduate study as the keys to unlocking this understanding? In other words, what expectations do we set up for our students that we do not meet or even manage well?

References


