School of Philosophy & Art History

2014 Report on 2013-2014 NSS and SSS Results

**NSS**

SPAH continues to do well on the NSS, with the question regarding “Overall Satisfaction” coming in at 93% for Art History and 97% for Philosophy – an increase over the previous year.

SPAH results are consistently ahead of (or in one case equal to) the University averages for each major sub-categories of the NSS, with the exception of the very low rating that SPAH students give the Student Union.

Last year we saw exceptionally strong performance on some of the core academic questions. 91% of respondents reported that they found the course(s) intellectually stimulating; 92% praised the staff as enthusiastic about the material they are teaching and 93% felt the staff have made the subject interesting; 97% agree that staff are good at explaining things; 87% reported that they received detailed feedback on their work. 90% of students report that they are able to contact staff when they need to, and 90% praise the efficacy of communication.

“Access to Specialised Equipment” continues to score poorly (75%) as does the student union (71%). If SPAH moves into the Registry Space after it is vacated, we will incorporate some planning around specialist equipment, with student input.

The promptness of marking (73%) and the clarity of the criteria in doing so (74%) was also far from ideal. Philosophy dropped from an 85% to a 78% for “Assessment and Feedback”.

In the written comments there were large numbers of extremely positive assessments, including the following: “I have no complaints whatsoever. Deciding to come and study art history at Essex is probably one of the best decisions I have made in my life”; “The quality of the teaching is superb. The guidance and help from the lecturers has been so helpful in my last year. The backup administration team should not be forgotten. They are a vital link and always friendly, welcoming and excellent at keeping everything connected!” and “The course content was both cutting-edge and useful. The lecturers were enthusiastic and willing to go further than was required by their job description. They made the material understandable without being condescending”.

The following problematic themes also emerged:

- Requests for anonymous marking
- Complaints about Timetabling.
- Complaints about the large role that exams play in assessment
- Complaints about the range of modules available.
- Complaints about deadlines from the same department coming too close together
Overall, SPAH students continue to report a high level of satisfaction in the main areas. The data shows an 88% affirmative response to the question: “Overall I am satisfied with the quality of my degree.” 90% report that they find the course intellectually stimulating. 93% report that staff are good at explaining things and 94% agree that staff are enthusiastic about what they are teaching; 92% found the staff accessible. This is very much in keeping with the results from the NSS survey, which suggests strong performance on core academic matters.

Though there was a substantial rise in Art History’s NSS “Learning Resources” score (from 79% to 89%), Philosophy’s score dropped from 89% to 84% (from 9th to 26th in ranking). Related complaints on both SSS and NSS comments point to lack of use of Moodle and Listen Again among lecturers. Scores for “I have received sufficient advice and support with my studies are also somewhat low: 77%

Assessment and Feedback also continues to be relatively problematic: Clarity of Criteria: 79%, Promptness of Feedback: 78%, Feedback has helped clarify what I didn’t understand: 64%. Students complain that they:

a.) Do not know what the marking criteria are or how to meet them efficiently:
b.) Are not receiving their marked coursework in a timely manner.

Positive comments generally focused on the enthusiasm and professionalism of the staff. They included the following:

• “The passion that my lecturers and teachers have for their teaching area and the amount of help I can get from both who are happy to help with whatever issue I may have”
• “Welcome week was fantastic, very helpful and informative. All departments are able to help and answer any questions I have had at all relating to work either via email or face to face”
• “Fantastic quality of teaching. Fascinating subject matter and course options. Warmth and friendliness from both students and staff in the department”

Negative comments included the following themes:

• Lack of module variety
• Poor quality/structure of the Enlightenment module
• Failure to provide Listen Again/Moodle resources
• Insufficient library resources
• Lack of structure and participation in class discussions
• Insufficient guidance on a.) researching and writing academic papers and b.) reading difficult texts.
**Action Plan**

**Action 1** - Access to specialised equipment: the University is increasing facility spent on students. If the move of SPAH into the vacated Registry Space goes ahead, we will incorporate planning around specialist equipment, with student input.

**Action 2** – Essay marking criteria and guidance: the Director of Undergraduate Studies (Philosophy) has reviewed our guidance notes on essay writing. These will be explained during first year modules such as PY111. Our assessment strategy and marking criteria are in the handbook (section 6), available online for current students.

**Action 3** – Lack of module variety: This will have been alleviated by faculty hires in Art History. The School-wide curriculum review will consider achieving greater module variety.

**Action 4** – Failure to provide Listen Again/Moodle resources: Lecturers will be encouraged to make use of these tools and specify on their module descriptions when and why this will not be possible.

**Action 5** – Requests for Anonymous marking: This is currently being trailed in 4 SPAH modules. We will review it in the Summer Term 2015 School Education Committee.

**Action 6** – Complaints about deadlines being too close together and weightings of exams as well as promptness of feedback: We do review deadlines every year. Weightings of exams will be addressed in the curriculum review. The Head will continue to encourage prompt return of feedback, and changes to FASer might facilitate prompted feedback.

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