Report on Student Satisfaction Survey (SSS) and the National Student Survey (NSS)

Results for 2012/13

School of Philosophy and Art History

It is rather to be regretted that the data provided to us from the 2012/13 NSS and SSS surveys once again treats the School of Philosophy and Art History as a single cohort. We welcome the partial disaggregation of the free text comments, which separate CISH responses from Philosophy and Art History responses. But the Philosophy and Art History free text comments are still aggregated. The School runs an array of quite diverse courses historically associated with discrete units of the University: Philosophy, Art History and CISH. The different courses present quite different issues in terms of Student Satisfaction, and in future it would certainly be preferable to have disaggregated data. With that proviso, however, the following observations are in order.

NSS

The degree schemes administered by SPAH continue to turn in an impressive performance on the NSS, with the “bottom line” question regarding “Overall Satisfaction” coming in at 92% for the School – a slight increase over the previous year, but still slightly lower than the historical highs associated with the discrete reporting units of Philosophy and Art History respectively, which both regularly turned in 100% student satisfaction ratings on this question. I also note that the 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 by SPAH students on the Student Union.

Among the high points in the NSS data, we take particular note of the exceptionally strong performance on some of the core academic questions. 94% of respondents reported that they found the course(s) intellectually stimulating; 94% praised the staff as enthusiastic about the material they are teaching and have made the subject interesting; 95% agree that staff are good at explaining things, with no students disagreeing; 89% reported that they received detailed feedback on their work. We were particularly pleased to see that our rating on the Personal Development category, which was a cause for concern in the previous year, has risen markedly in these results, and now equals the University average.

“Access to Specialised Equipment”. We scored poorly on this question, with only 76% responding affirmatively. I note however, that this is in improvement over last year, and that there is fairly low negative response on this question. It is possible that in the case of Philosophy students, responses to this question reflect a perceived lack of need for specialised equipment. The NSS does not really provide a way to distinguish different kinds of response on this query. Nonetheless, we propose that the planned move of SPAH into the vacated Registry Space should incorporate some planning around specialist equipment, with student input (Action 1).

In the more detailed stats provided by the optional survey, to which only 44% of the students responded, one serious cause for concern is the rating on the “Careers” questions, which is an area where the scores are relatively low and for which we do not have a university comparison. This in turn correlates with a significant drop in our performance in the annual employability survey. My own view is that the University’s recent strategy on raising the profile of Employability with undergraduates has not been as effective as it might be. Students are so bombarded with information about Careers and Employability that they have tuned it out as noise. But the School has recently elected to introduce a co-curricular offer on Employability from 2014 on (Action 2). While I am profoundly skeptical of the policy of requiring all students to take such a model, it will provide us with a context and venue to perform better both in this category of the NSS and in Employability results more broadly. We are working closely with the Careers Centre staff and our Faculty Employability Co-ordinator this year to put on events for undergraduates but to date attendance at these events has been minimal, despite all the
emails/lecture call-outs/posters advertising them. We will be seeking the students’ views on better ways to engage them in careers activities (Action 3).

There were also low scores in the section ‘Feedback from Students’. Again only 44% responded to these questions but this is an area we need to think about more carefully as our current methods of soliciting feedback from students and responding to that feedback (via staff/student liaison committees, open meetings twice a year and emails relating to ‘you asked – we did’) do not seem to be having an impact. The most recent general feedback meeting held this week attracted three students in philosophy and one in art history (Action 4).

Free-text comments: There were many extremely positive comments made on the helpfulness, enthusiasm, approachability and support from committed staff, which is pleasing to hear, with students making comments such as ‘Great material overall, value for money. Great teaching staff’, ‘the best experience of my life’, ‘very good course. I would do it again’, ‘the teaching is incredible’, ‘studying a pleasure and an overall excellent experience’. There was no particular pattern amongst the negative comments except with regard to lack of clarity on the marking criteria applied. Steps have already been implemented to address this and further action will be taken as mentioned in the SSS report below. Other negative points raised but which did not have a common theme included: module clashes, change of modules offered, limited number of modules offered, timetabling, essay deadlines, marking inconsistencies.

SSS

Overall, SPAH students continue to report on a high level of satisfaction in the main areas. The data shows a 90% affirmative response to the bottom line question: “Overall I am satisfied with the quality of my degree.” 93% report that they find the course intellectually stimulating, staff are good at explaining things and staff are enthusiastic about what they are teaching; 94% 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.

Some of the lower scores, again as with the NSS, are around careers and feedback. Careers: Only 61% agreed that they had been given good advice about opportunities for further study (9% disagreed) and 58% agreed they had good advice for making career choices (13% disagreed). This is a slight increase over last year’s result. 66% agreed that their course is improving their career prospects, down from 80% last time, but only 8% disagreed. All this suggests that the University’s investment in Employability continues to miss the mark, see comments above under the NSS report, although it is early days. It is hard to know what to do about this, but for present our focus shall be in developing the co-curricular employability module mentioned above. Feedback: I am delighted to see that our work in clarifying the marking criteria is beginning to register. In the previous round of the SSS only 58% of student reported that the marking criteria used are clear. Including the criteria on the essay cover sheet seems to have made a difference, with 70% responding affirmatively to this question. We still continue to advise all undergraduates of the criteria by email and in their teaching events during the autumn term. However, there is still more work to be done here, and the Director of UG Studies will review our guidance notes on essay writing (Action 5), as this is something that was mentioned in our annual feedback meeting. Feedback from Students: This has our lowest scores and actions being taken can be seen in the NSS report above.

Free-text comments: Again many extremely positive comments such as ‘the level of intellect here is impressive’, ‘the enthusiasm in teaching is invaluable’, ‘I feel I have improved academically in terms of essay writing since last year as a result of guidance’, ‘teaching staff...are always enthusiastic and enjoy what they are teaching which in turn makes learning from them easier and more enjoyable’, ‘The first few weeks really made Essex feel like home, the way people on my course were introduced to each other in the introductory talks really made it easier to settle in’, ‘lecturers and class teachers are available and approachable outside of their strict teaching and marking capacity’, ‘I admire, in particular,
the level of companionship and ease when speaking to my lecturers and class teachers. There was certainly a very warm welcome into my department’, ‘my lecturers are obviously passionate about the course they are lecturing. They are excited to teach and because of this, put their all into the lessons’. The main themes appearing in the negative comments relate to the library, SU, accommodation which will be addressed by others. On the academic side comments related to timetabling, delays in the return of marked coursework, coursework deadlines close together, heavy reading workload, the lack of participation by other students. There was no overall common theme of discontent.

**Action Plan**

**Action 1** - Access to specialised equipment: we propose that the planned move of SPAH into the vacated Registry Space should incorporate some planning around specialist equipment, with student input.

**Action 2** – Careers and employability: to introduce a co-curricular offer on Employability from 2014/15.

**Action 3** – Careers and employability: to solicit views from the Staff/Student Liaison Committee on ways to advertise and encourage students to attend and participate in careers events.

**Action 4** – Feedback from students: to solicit views from the Staff/Student Liaison Committee on ways to encourage students to respond to requests for feedback and to attend and participate in feedback events.

**Action 5** – Essay marking criteria: the Director of Undergraduate Studies (Philosophy) to review our guidance notes on essay writing.

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