Student Experience Research 2012

Part 3: Subject Differences

Student experience research to gain insight into the quality of the learning experience

national union of students

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Foreword

Welcome to the third section of the NUS/QAA Student Experience Report which provides an insight into the student learning and teaching experience. This section of the report focuses on the subject difference element of the research.

In order to truly understand the student experience, we must acknowledge that there are differences in that experience between different subject disciplines. Through being aware of these subject difference students' unions can lobby and campaign for improvements in the teaching and learning experiences for all students. Irrespective of subject, all students should have an excellent student experience during their time in higher education and therefore this research is imperative for providing an evidence base for equal standards of teaching and learning.

I was interested to see in the research that whilst there are distinct differences between subjects around topics such as employability and motivations for learning, there are fewer differences between disciplines on internationalisation and enhancing learning and teaching. Identifying these similarities, concerns and perceptions of students on differing courses is also interesting.

I hope you find this section of the NUS/QAA Student Experience Report interesting and helpful when thinking of how to tackle differences between subject groups. I also hope however, that you find it useful to see that many issues are cross-discipline and are felt by all students on all courses. The expectations and perceptions of students are often more similar than expected and this should also be harnessed when developing teaching and learning policy..

Usman Ali
Vice President (Higher Education)
National Union of Students

Foreword from QAA

Making sure that students get the best possible educational experience they can is a vital part of what QAA does. Our aim is to meet students' needs and be valued by them. We do this by working with students as partners, responding to their views and needs, and protecting their interests. We support higher education providers as they aim to meet and shape students' expectations.

Students play an active part in shaping our strategic direction, the judgments we make about higher education standards and quality, and in developing national guidance for higher education institutions. Our student Board member and Student Sounding Board influence QAA's policy direction, and we employ a student reviewer on all of our Institutional Review teams.

This year, we have taken student engagement to the next level by entering into a 12-month partnership with NUS that includes:

- research by NUS into the 21st century student's experience of UK higher education
- training and development to engage students in quality assurance
- bespoke support for 16 self-nominated students' unions that want to develop their quality agenda.

In this, the third of four research reports, NUS has surveyed 5,000 UK higher education students on their student experience and focused on subject difference. The final report on the first year student experience will follow.

The findings provide food for thought in our rapidly changing higher education environment. I trust these reports will stimulate debate and inform our thinking on the whole learning experience.

Anthony McClaran
Chief Executive
Quality Assurance Agency

Executive Summary

This report focuses on the research outcomes of the 2011–12 NUS Student Experience Research in relation to students' perceptions of their learning and teaching. This report is the third in a series of focused reports around student perceptions of their higher education experience. Other reports include: teaching and learning, contact hours and the first year experience.

The research consisted of a multi method approach with a data collection period ran from November 2011 to December 2011.

Motivations for learning

- 65% of students stated that their reason for wanting to go to university was to increase their career opportunities
- Those studying creative arts were much more likely to pick a course due to personal interest in the subject and for 'a love of the subject'.
- The online survey suggests that the main motivators of learning were intrinsic to the student. Wanting to do the best they can (85.7%), love of the subject (73.8%) and needing to pass their degree (62.4%) were the main motivators of learning.
- Medicine & Dentistry students were very much focused on the need to do a degree for their chosen career path and 'wanting to do the best they can' as a motivator to learning (88.4%)

Teaching and Learning

- Focusing primarily on the lecturers/tutors teaching skills (rated as most important) there were little variation between the subject types, indicating that regardless of course type the lecturers/tutors teaching skills are very important.
- Turning to interactive group teaching sessions/ tutorials (rated a second most important) again there was little variation between the course types indicating that interactive group teaching sessions is important to the learning and teaching experience at university.
- Students studying education and creative arts & design rated interactive group teaching sessions/ tutorials as slightly more important than other groups with 88.5% of education students and 88.4% of creative arts & design students rating them as 'very important or 'important'.
- When discussion within the focus groups focused on teaching quality - their expectations of this versus their actual experiences - both STEM and non-STEM students expressed concerns around course organisation and management.
- When asked about teaching delivery methods, non-STEM students called more frequently for access to their teaching staff.
- Both STEM and non-STEM focus group participants raised issues around timetabling. They called for more structured timetabling with a combination of teaching and learning styles; lectures, seminars, independent study.

Employability

- Those studying medicine & dentistry, education and subjects allied to medicine felt significantly more prepared for their chosen field of employment with those on social studies, written arts and historical & philosophical courses felt the least prepared.
- A further link was found in the focus groups with motivations for study with many non-STEM students picking their course due to a passionate interest in the subject, rather than for a specific career path.
- Non-STEM courses expressed more of an appreciation of placements. This is perhaps due to the experience these placements provide for future employability and for more exposure to potential careers.

Internationalisation

- Whilst the majority of students agreed that their degree would be useful in an international context, there was little or no awareness of "internationalisation" as a term and was commonly misunderstood as only relevant to international students.
- In most cases, internationalisation was assumed; they have been to a British university therefore assumed it is international recognised.

Methodology

The research consisted of a multi method approach combining the breadth of a national online survey, along with an in-depth qualitative approach through in-person focus groups at 8 locations nationally, followed by an online discussion group to validate the findings. These combined methodologies provided an holistic approach, creating synergy and allowing for exploration of issues to emerge through the various fieldwork activities.

Two initial 120 minute focus groups in Manchester on November 14th 2011 kicked-off the qualitative research strand as pilots and these were then examined and the discussion guide tweaked for improvements.

The focus groups then ran until November 23rd 2011, overall covering eight locations across the UK, and resulting in an ultimate total of 135 student respondents. Focus groups were video recorded and subsequently transcribed.

The sample sizes utilised are reflective of the student strata and were driven by HEFCE student data statistics, with a key focus on university type, year of study, age, and gender. Recruitment was purposive to this effect, building on a number of routes to students. Respondents were offered incentives to encourage participation and thank them for their time.

The online discussion group provided additional qualitative research and representation, where students got the opportunity to get involved in the research who might not practically be able to make a focus group or have the confidence, etc. Questions posed in this online group validated the findings of the online survey and focus groups.

All research was conducted in accordance with the MRS code of conduct.

The following documents can be downloaded by visiting: **www.nus.org.uk/studentexperience**

- Online Survey Sample Profile (Demographics)
- Institution Groupings Definitions
- Focus Groups Sample Frame
- Focus Groups Discussion Guide
- Online Discussion Group Discussion Guide

Findings

In the online survey students were asked to indicate which subject they were studying from the following list:

- Medicine & Dentistry
- Engineering and Technology
- Subjects allied to medicine
- Physical sciences
- Maths & Computer Sciences
- Education
- Business & administrative studies
- Law
- Creative arts & design
- Social studies
- Historical & Philosophical studies
- Languages
- Written arts

This self selected list has been used as the basis for the analysis of this report to see where there are subject differences.

The qualitative focus groups have also been analysed in terms of subject difference. It should be noted, however, that when it comes to this strand of the research, as is the nature of qualitative research, the sample (x135) is less robust than the large-scale quantitative online survey. As such when you start to analyse this data in terms of subject difference, you are then basing your analysis on a further reduced sample size.

The other difference to bear in mind that exists between the focus groups and online survey is that, unlike the online survey, the focus groups don't include the x13 course categories that respondents self-selected and were then analysed via cross-tabulations. Focus groups respondents introduced themselves with a brief reference to their course and from this information the x16 2 hour focus group transcripts have been analysed in terms of those who were STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics) students and those who weren't.

So overall, although the focus group findings are based on a small sample, there are at times noticeable differences in respondents by STEM and non-STEM students. Where there are not any noticeable differences this will also be stated as a valuable finding in itself.

Starting university

From the online survey the main reason for wanting to go to university was to increase career opportunities in future with a degree, with 65.1% (n=2733) of students selecting this as their main reason. As table 1 shows there were some differences between the subject types. 81.0% (n=410) of Business & administrative studies students said the increasing their career opportunities in future was their main reason for going, compared to the national average of 65%. Just 58.1% (n=86) of Medicine & Dentistry students said that the main reasons for going to university was to increase their career opportunities in the future by having a degree; they put a greater emphasis on needing a degree for their future career (69.9%, n=102).

Again there were differences between the subject types when students were asked why they had chosen their course. As table 2 shows, the course content matching their interests was the main reason for choosing their course. However this was more important to Creative arts & design students, 78.9% (n=317) and Medicine and Dentistry students, 77.0% (n=137) in comparison to the national average of 69% (n=4540).

Motivators for Learning

The online survey suggests that the main motivators of learning were intrinsic to the student. Wanting to do the best they can (85.7%, n=4255), love of the subject (73.8%, n=3661) and needing to pass their degree (62.4%, n=3098) were the main motivators of learning. From an external point of view, having an inspirational lecturer, and encouragement from the family to do well, were regarded as motivators of learning by around half of students (54.7% and 45.7% respectively).

Table 1: Question 17. What were the main reasons for wanting to go to university? (Please indicate your top three reasons) (n=4041)

Which subject are you studying?	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13
Medicine & Dentistry n=878	58.1%	**69.9%**	3.2%	9.3%	6.1%	18.8%	22.1%	29.1%	24.4%	12.5%	24.4%	10.3%	20.7%
Engineering and Technology n=1847	71%	55%	4%	23.9%	8.5%	17.3%	37.7%	33.3%	33%	20.4%	27.3%	11%	20.3%
Subjects allied to medicine n=1838	62.9%	64.5%	11.9%	20.3%	5.8%	19.1%	26.6%	25.8%	26.5%	12.8%	27%	24.6%	26.5%
Physical sciences n=2167	64.2%	49.6%	9.4%	10.2%	10.7%	11.3%	33.6%	31.6%	24.8%	19.8%	22.1%	13.1%	22.9%
Maths & Computer Sciences n=1336	61.9%	45.8%	17.1%	23%	10.8%	31.1%	33.1%	31%	30.5%	18%	32.3%	17.5%	29%
Education n=1289	64.5%	72.8%	10%	8.2%	7.9%	10%	22.3%	18.4%	27%	15.4%	17.6%	2.9%	30.6%
Business & administrative studies n=2608	**81%**	38.3%	7%	18.2%	9.4%	17.4%	23.6%	25.6%	31.2%	20.8%	23.1%	12.4%	18.4%
Law n=841	67.1%	60.8%	4%	16.2%	6.9%	20%	26.7%	25%	24.8%	9.8%	20.5%	20.7%	25%w
Creative arts & design n=1840	71.6%	44.2%	8.7%	19.7%	8.5%	14.1%	26.8%	40%	35.4%	19.3%	21.8%	18.9%	19.4%
Social studies n=3045	69.9%	51.1%	12.8%	15.3%	13.5%	16.7%	29%	28.5%	32.2%	16.4%	21.1%	17.2%	24.7%
Historical & Philosophical studies n=1482	60.8%	56.7%	8.8%	14.3%	10.5%	17.5%	35.2%	31.7%	34.5%	20%	17.4%	14.3%	22.6%
Languages n=792	61%	53.3%	14.3%	15.4%	19%	10.5%	33.9%	30.4%	24.8%	26.5%	23.3%	15.4%	17.6%
Written arts n=957	63.5%	46.8%	-	12%	14.3%	21.1%	32.4%	30.6%	32.2%	21.1%	15.6%	4%	11.1%
National Average n=4041	65.1%	50.7%	7.4%	8.6%	5.4%	7.6%	22.9%	21.1%	21.3%	8.4%	4%	15.4%	39.6%

Key:

1 – Increase in career opportunities in future with a degree n=4041

2 – I need a degree for my future career n=2359

3 – My Friends' n=639

4 – My Parents n=877

5 – My Partner n=661

6 – I was encouraged by my previous place of education n=1162

7 – I enjoy learning n=2263

8 – I enjoy my subject n=2788

9 – The opportunity for self development n=264

10 – The opportunity to live away from home n=1029

11 – The opportunity to meet new people n=1144

12 – Didn't know what else to do n=783

13 – Other n=530

14 – National average n=4041

Table 2: Question 18. What were the main reasons for choosing your course? (Please indicate your top three reasons) (n=4540)

Which subject are you studying?	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Medicine & Dentistry n=725	**77%**	22.2%	26.5%	20%	27.2%	23.4%	17.9%	29.9%	14.3%	40%
Engineering and Technology n=1560	72.4%	30.4%	29.9%	29.4%	35.6%	32.2%	30.3%	27.1%	29.7%	18.2%
Subjects allied to medicine n=1637	74.8%	22.9%	22.6%	18.6%	25%	24.1%	23.2%	20.7%	19.4%	39%
Physical sciences n=1922	69.7%	21.4%	19.7%	20.7%	20.1%	30.3%	27.9%	19.1%	26.1%	18%
Maths & Computer Sciences n=1180	68.3%	32.4%	29.1%	23.9%	28.1%	31%	30.7%	23.3%	34.1%	27.7%
Education n=1143	68.2%	19%	25.3%	23.6%	26.1%	33.3%	33.7%	21.6%	12.1%	31.4%
Business & administrative studies n=2171	60.3%	28.9%	25.4%	22.8%	34.3%	29.8%	30.3%	29%	24%	26.2%
Law n=747	60.7%	18.2%	29.2%	15.4%	44.4%	39.3%	29.2%	25.5%	18.9%	29.2%
Creative arts & design n=1581	**78.9%**	23.4%	22%	23.4%	23.9%	27.6%	21.1%	21.1%	24.4%	12.8%
Social studies n=2689	69.1%	24%	23.2%	17.5%	30.8%	27.8%	27%	22.8%	19.3%	19.5%
Historical & Philosophical studies n=1388	68.4%	21.7%	20%	18.6%	20.1%	30.7%	26.8%	16.7%	14.3%	12.8%
Languages n=713	67.8%	22%	18.3%	20.5%	22.5%	43.5%	40.7%	13.9%	21.8%	26.3%
Written arts n=886	72.4%	8.5%	16.7%	17.7%	16.3%	29.1%	23.5%	15.6%	6.7%	18.9%
National Average	**69%**	18.8%	14.6%	10.6%	23.1%	27.5%	22.7%	12.6%	12.5%	32.8%

Key:

1 – Course content matches my interests n=4540

2 – I wanted to study something new/different to my school subjects n=1383

3 – Options/flexibility to study what I want n=1849

4 – Quality of research conducted by my tutors n=1198

5 – Course is well-regarded by potential employers n=2446

6 – Course was structured in a way that suited me (e.g. evening lectures, distance learning or compressed teaching) n=1604

7 – Course was a natural progression after my A-Levels previous study n=2101

8 – Good work experience/placement opportunities n=1517

9 – Opportunity to study abroad n=1024

10 – Other n=680

A higher proportion of students studying subjects allied to medicine (89.2%, n=412), education (88.7%, n=286) and medicine & dentistry (88.4%, n=168) selected 'Wanting to do the best they can' as a motivator to learning. 'Love of the subject' was more of a motivator to creative arts & design (85.2%, n=357), written arts (84.9%, n=225) and language students compared to the national average of 73.8% (n=3628).

Quality Learning and Teaching

When thinking about the learning and teaching experience at university the lecturers/tutors teaching skills were by far seen as the most important with 90.6% (n=4527) of students saying they were important to some extent. The next most important factors were interactive group teaching sessions/tutorials (83.4%, n=4244) and library support (78.3%, n=2400). A breakdown of the results is shown in chart 1 below.

Focusing primarily on the lecturers/tutors teaching skills (rated as most important), as shown in chart 2, there was little variation between the subject types, indicating that regardless of course type the lecturers/tutors teaching skills are very important.

Turning to interactive group teaching sessions/tutorials (rated a second most important) as shown in chart 3, again there was little variation between the course types indicating that interactive group teaching sessions is important to the learning and teaching experience at university.

Students studying education and creative arts & design rated interactive group teaching sessions/tutorials as slightly more important than other groups with 88.5% of education students and 88.4% of creative arts & design students rating them as 'very important or 'important'.

Enhancing Learning and Teaching

To improve the quality of the learning and teaching experiences at university, more interactive group teaching sessions/tutorials were most popular (50.2%,

Chart 1: Question 23. Thinking about the learning and teaching experience at university how important, if at all, are the following? (n=5086)

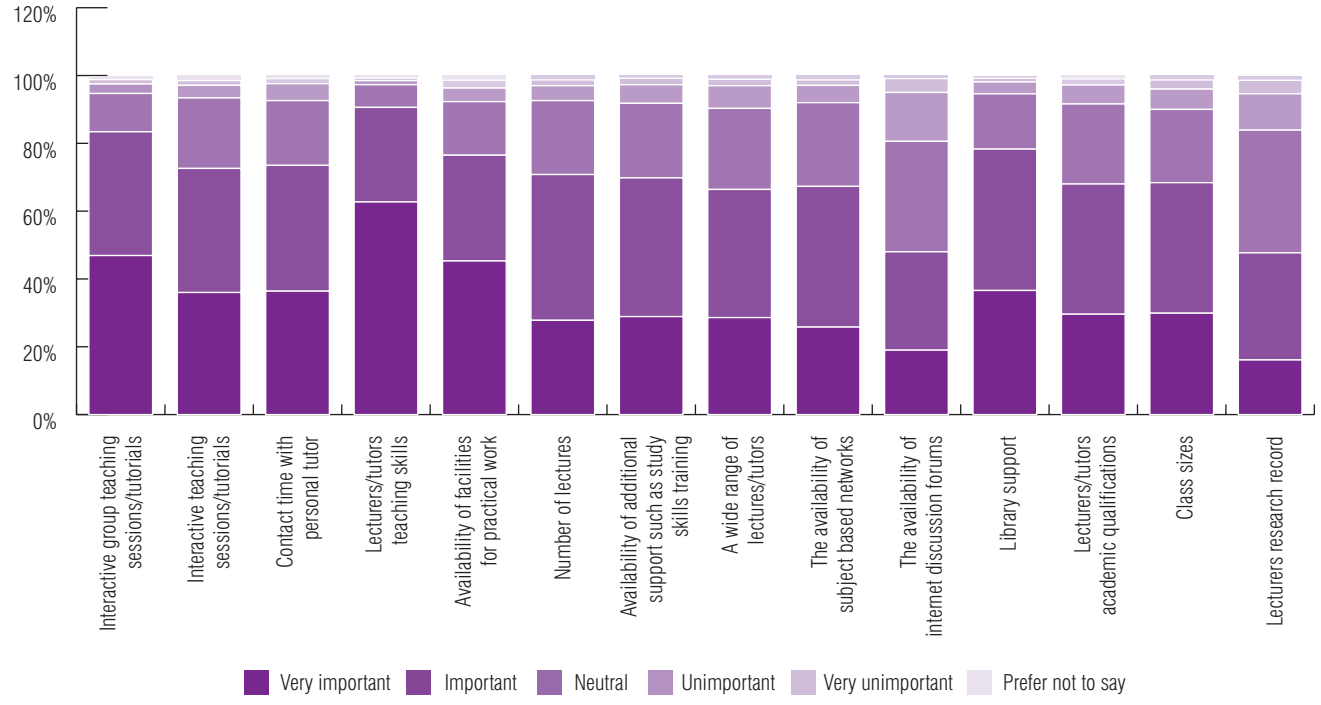


Chart 2: Thinking about the learning and teaching experience at university how important, if at all, are the following? (n=4939)

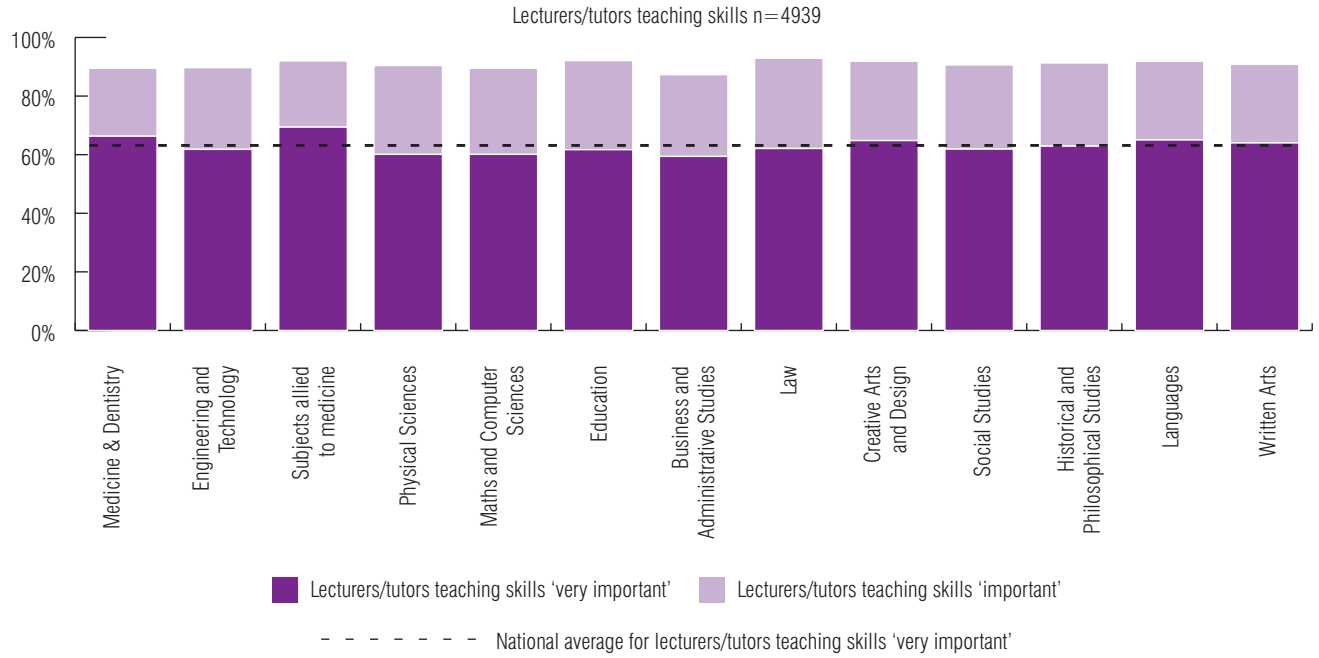
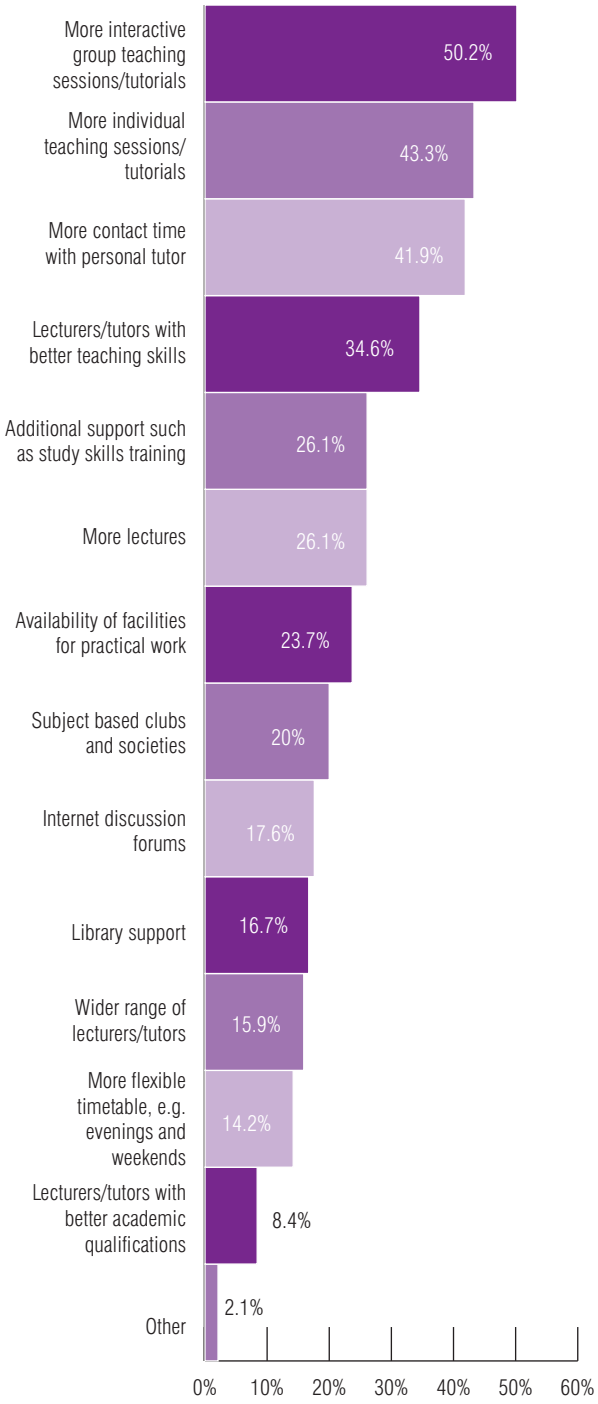


Chart 3: Question 23. Thinking about the learning and teaching experience at university how important, if at all, are the following? (n=4930)

Chart 4: Question 58. What, if anything, would improve the quality of the teaching and learning experience at your university? (n=4440)



n=2229) followed by more individual teaching sessions/ tutorials (43.3%, n=1922) and more contact time with personal tutor (41.9%, n=1862). Just 14.2% (n=632) said more flexible timetables and 8.4% (n=372) said that lecturers with better academic qualifications would improve the quality of the learning and teaching experiences at their university.

Looking at interactive group teaching sessions/tutorials segmented by subject type, again there was little variation between the groups, as shown in chart 7. A slightly higher proportion of business & administrative studies students (55.7%) thought that more interactive group teaching sessions/tutorials would improve the quality of the teaching and learning experiences at university compared to just 41.2% of creative arts & design students who preferred more individual teaching sessions/tutorials.

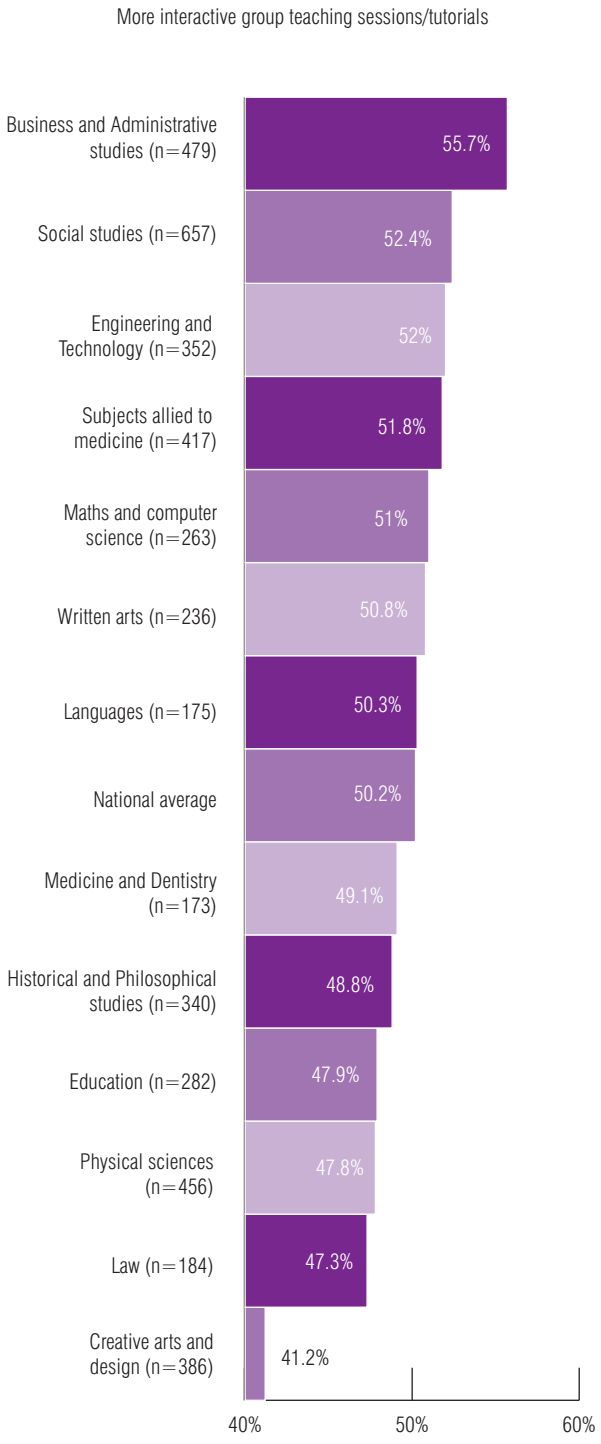
Looking at all areas of potential improvements to the quality of the teaching and learning experience at university, there was little variation between the subject types compared to the overall findings shown in chart 4.

Much of the online survey findings around student views of their learning and teaching experience can be mirrored in the focus groups and in some cases in terms of subject differences. When discussion within the focus groups focused on teaching quality - their expectations of this versus their actual experiences - both STEM and non-STEM students expressed concerns around course organisation and management. This can be seen in the following two quotes which represent the two different subject categories:

"I was expecting that if I emailed a lecturer, he or she would then give me the support that I needed. One time I told my lecturer I was using the online resources and I was struggling to obtain information. She replied back saying "I don't have time for you this week, and I don't have time to give individual help for 160 students". I said to myself that 160 students aren't going to be asking for guidance"

Male, Russell Group, 1st Year, STEM

Chart 5: Question 23. Thinking about the learning and teaching experience at university how important, if at all, are the following? (n=4939)



"There is a new system where they will try to see 11 students in an hour. If you don't get seen in that hour then that is your problem. You'll have to go away and do it yourself. But then you think "What am I paying you for?" Female, University Alliance Group, 3rd Year, Non-STEM

This focus on organisation and management was also evident when they conducted the 'typical course weekday' creative exercise. The following example of a respondent's course day shows this with her negative reference to feeling lost and not knowing where to get help from:

Figure 1: A typical day on my course

Beginning of day on my course

- First lecture 9am
- Lectures ✓ location

✓ Lecture professors approachable (mostly)

✗ I feel lost sometimes (nowhere to go for extra help)

Middle of day on my course

- Home for lunch/break
  Review lecture notes
- Back for lectures

✓ PASS (discussion group) However just go over broadly
Tutorial (unknown – peer help – need professors)

End of day on my course

- Further readings/study notes

(Taken from the first group held in Manchester)

On closer inspection, however, it is possible to see a slight slant towards non-STEM students in the focus groups, as they express a need for more contact time and, related to this, access to staff, more often than their STEM student counterparts. This is backed up in the subsequent focus group discussion around preferred teaching delivery methods, when again non-STEM students called more frequently for access to their teaching staff. It can be argued that this added emphasis on contact hours / access to staff by non-STEM students derives from the fact that their courses will usually involve less contact hours than on STEM courses.

When looking at focus group respondents' typical course days, another aspect of their courses that they either appreciated, or would ideally like to have, is what they commonly referred to as a 'structured timetable'. Further discussion revealed that this was so that their trips into university were worthwhile and not either a wasted commute in terms of time / expense or opportunity for productive independent learning. This can be seen in these two quotes from both a STEM and non-STEM student:

"On Wednesday and Friday I'm only in for an hour. It takes me an hour and a half to get there, so I'm taking a three hour round trip to go in for an hour, but that's something that I have to do".
Female, Non-aligned, 2nd Year, STEM

"On my course the lectures are spread throughout the day. I'd rather have them close together. I'd be able to spend a lot more time on research and reading. I tend to find that if you have an hour or two between lectures you just begin to get your mind on it, and then you have to dash off to a lecture".
Male, Russell Group, 2nd Year, Non-STEM

In fact, focus group respondents went further to describe their ideal structure for their courses, as has been previously discussed in the NUS/QAA report focussing on Learning and Teaching, and takes the form of lectures, followed by seminars. Both STEM and non-STEM students saw this structure to their course as the ideal, as can be seen in the following quotes:

"I think if you've got 6 hours of solid lectures it would be nice to break it up with a tutorial or something. Rather than having a three hour block, then lunch, then another three hour block. You do get tired just looking at a screen all day".
Male, Non-aligned, 2nd Year, STEM

"The seminars are great for tying up loose ends and for preparing you for further lectures as well... I've found that seminars are great for getting to know people on your course. You get to talk to people that you wouldn't necessarily get to meet."
Male, Russell Group, 1st Year, Non-STEM

Certainly, as can be seen in the online survey, seminars were a key component of what students across the board regarded as a quality teaching offering. As has been discussed, seminars gave students the opportunity: for discussion, to put their knowledge into practice (which they saw as a more effective teaching method), to learn from and build relationships with their course peers, and to have contact hours with their teaching staff in smaller groups.

This call for seminars can also been seen in the preferred teaching delivery section of the focus group, when 'seminars/tutorials/smaller groups' were frequently referenced. Again, this was by both STEM and non-STEM students, as is illustrated here:

"I think a bit more group work would be better. It would be good to hear other people's point of view. Basically it can bring people closer and help with friendships. More group work should be introduced".
Male, University Alliance Group, 1st Yr, STEM

"You get to bounce ideas off your peers as well as friends from the course; you may hear of things that are suggested that you may not have picked up on yourself". Female, Russell Group, 1st Yr, Non-STEM

Within this section of the focus groups when respondents identified their preferred teaching, a slight difference based on subjects can be seen. This first occurred when some STEM students called for a more 'creative' approach to their teaching. The other slight difference that came through when STEM and non-STEM students were analysed was around online

learning. STEM students gave specific examples ('Wiki's' and 'Virtual Learning Environments') which they requested more contact with, whereas non STEM students did not. You can argue that this type of learning is more suited to their STEM type courses, unlike non-STEM subjects, where there can be more of need for contact hours (and we know for which there is more of a demand by non-STEM students).

Employability

In the online survey when it came to the employability of their course, there were differences between the subject types, with a higher level of agreement amongst Medicine, Dentistry and Education students, as shown in chart 6.

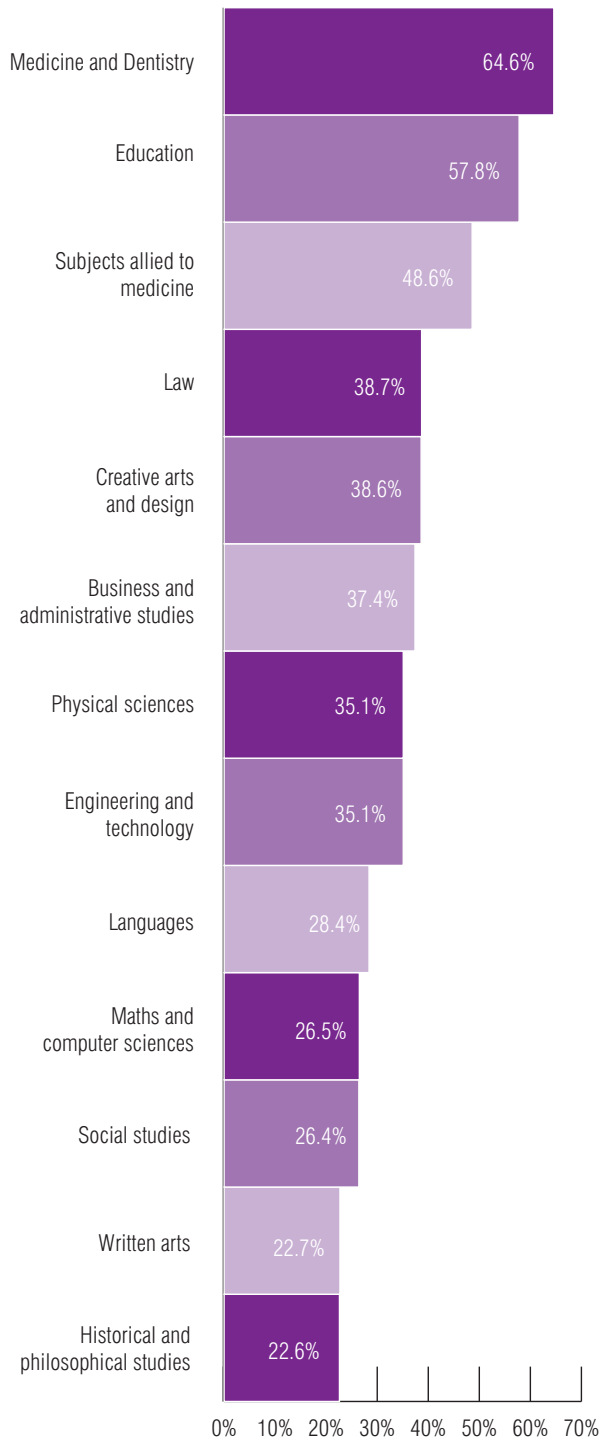
This online survey finding was also seen in the focus groups when respondents were asked about their thoughts, if indeed they had any, on what they might do after university and whether their university was making them employable. At this point a split became obvious between those students who were studying more vocational courses, broadly speaking STEM subjects, and those who were non-STEM students. As was also seen in the pre-arrival course choice findings of the online survey, a pattern emerged where Non-STEM students tended to talk with more of a short-term view, based more simply on a love of their course.

> *"I'm doing this degree because I enjoy it and it is a degree so it gets me to the next stage. I've not looked into particular employability for my course"*
> Female, Russell Group, 1st Year, Non-STEM

In contrast STEM students tended to have a more long-term view, where they had chosen their course with an eye on a job at the end of it, and expected their course to help them with this aim.

What was interesting in the more detailed focus groups discussions around employability, was that there was a slightly different emphasis on specific aspects of their university/college learning experience. Although, as discussed, non-STEM students tended not to be as focussed on their employment post-university/college,

Chart 6: Question 71. To what extent, if at all, do you agree you course will prepare you for your chosen employment field? (n=4961)



they did voice more of an appreciation of placement opportunities facilitated by their institution.

"One of the things that ours does is three workplace projects. They're really good because they can give you tasks that can really stretch you and then you can write about them if you get good results from them, and you can put them on the CV. It shows what you've done in a work environment, and it's normally much more than what you'd get from your employer on a day-to-day basis". Female, University Alliance Group, 3rd Year, Non-STEM

When it came to the specifics of course employability and STEM students, they more commonly articulated an appreciation of / or demand for specific employment training from their course.

"We've actually had a few lectures on my course that outline what people with Applied Science degrees actually do. That sort of thing gave us insights to what sort of job we could get and how to angle yourself to get them. They have given us a few ideas. One of our lectures has told us about her career and the labs that she has worked in... It wasn't a proper lecture but it was good". Male, University Alliance Group, 1st Year, STEM

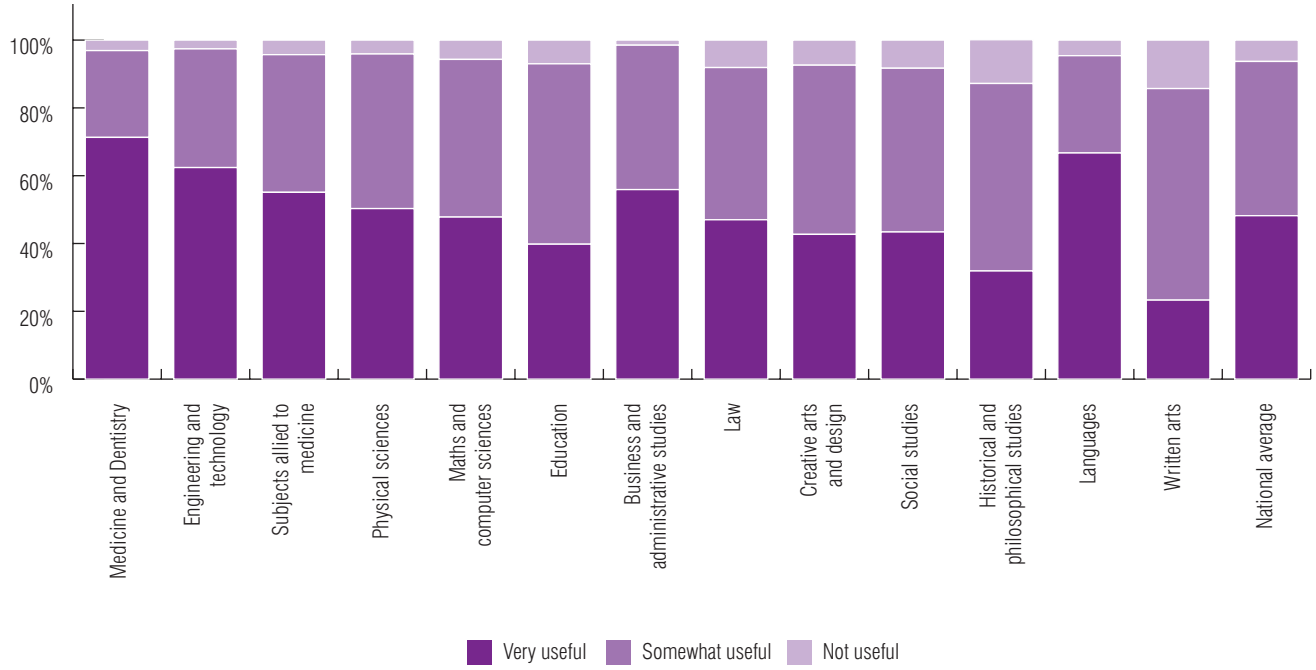
This kind of specific training requirement makes sense now that we know that overall STEM students have more of an idea of the job that they want their course to take them to.

Internationalisation

Returning to the online survey, the majority of students (93.7%, n=4649) thought that their degree would be 'very useful' or 'somewhat useful' in an international context. As shown in chart 7 below there were difference between the subject types.

A higher proportion of medicine and dentistry (71.3%, n=139) and language (66.7%, n=130) students felt that their degree would be very useful in an international context. Just over a tenth of written arts (14.3, n=38) and historical philosophical studies (12.9%, n=50) students felt that their degree was not at all useful

Chart 7: Question 30. How useful, if at all, do you think that your degree will be in an international context? (n=4962)



in an international context. Overall, business and administrative studies degrees were seen as most useful in an international context, with 98.8% of students (n=516) saying that it was 'very useful' or 'somewhat useful'.

Internationalisation was another dedicated section of the focus groups, when respondents were asked for their definition of the term and the extent to which, if at all, their course gave them the opportunity to work abroad.

Unlike the related employability, broadly speaking no real differences were observed between the two subject sets of students. Instead they were generally unified by either little or no awareness of internationalisation as a term and it was commonly misunderstood as something only relevant to international students.

That said, there were those respondents who were studying courses where internalisation was a priority (e.g. languages, international relations, interpreting, etc.) which is where we saw a higher awareness of the term and the extent to which their course was preparing them for it.

Across subjects there was a sense of internationalisation being assumed by students. This was based on the reputation of their university, and in some cases just on the sheer fact they attended a British university.

> *"I think mine will. It's ranked third in the country so it should do".* Female, Russell Group, Masters, STEM

Conclusions

The findings this research presents are both interesting and helpful for investigating subject difference and in many cases, subject similarity. There is often an assumption that students on differing courses will have very distinct perspectives, perceptions and expectations and whilst this is proven to be the case in some aspects of the student experiences, there are also areas where regardless of subject, issues are collectively raised.

When looking at motivations for study 65% of students stated that their reason for wanting to go to university was to increase their career opportunities. However, there were differences between subject groups when asked why they chose their specific course. Those studying creative arts were much more likely to pick a course due to personal interest in the subject and for 'a love of the subject'. Medicine & Dentistry students were very much focused on the need to do a degree for their chosen career path.

Attitudes towards teaching and learning appear to be less divergent between subject groups. When thinking about teaching and learning the lecturers/tutors teaching skills were by far seen as the most important with 90.6% of students stating they were important to some extent. There was very little variation between subjects on this issue, alongside interactive group learning, demonstrating the importance of institutions taking the quality and development of teaching seriously.

When asked about improving the quality of teaching and learning experiences there was again little variation between subject types. However, differences between STEM and non-STEM students were identified in the focus groups. When thinking about their expectations versus their actual experiences the students were unified in expressing a concern around access to staff and contact time. It was found that students expected more frequent contact with staff, and more one to one support. This was slightly more evident with non-STEM students for which traditionally they have fewer timetabled teaching time and therefore access to staff.

Similarly, both STEM and non-STEM focus group participants raised issues around timetabling. They called for more structured timetabling with a combination of teaching and learning styles; lectures, seminars, independent study. This research clearly identifies a common concern around organisation and management (an issue also raised across institutions in the National Student Survey). Student expectation of contact time and teaching delivery is an important area both institutions and students' unions need to address.

Employability is one are where the research shows a more distinct subject difference. It is clear from the responses that those studying medicine & dentistry, education and subjects allied to medicine felt significantly more prepared for their chosen field of employment. Those on social studies, written arts and historical & philosophical courses felt the least prepared. A further link was found in the focus groups with motivations for study with many non-STEM students picking their course due to a passionate interest in the subject, rather than for a specific career path. Institutions need to be better at articulating potential career paths and employability skills development to those with no obvious career path.

Interestingly it was also found that those on non-STEM courses expressed more of an appreciation of placements. This is perhaps due to the experience these placements provide for future employability and for more exposure to potential careers.

The majority of students agreed that their degree would be useful in an international context. However, it was also found that across subjects there was little or no awareness of internationalisation as a term, and was commonly misunderstood as only relevant to international students. In most cases, internationalisation was assumed; they have been to a British university therefore assumed it is international recognised. Institutions could do more to make aware opportunities abroad and the international context of students' degrees.

This research demonstrates that students, regardless of subject discipline can often have very similar perceptions and demands when it comes to the student experience. Whilst some significant differences appear, for example around employability for which institutions

should address, the similarities around contact time and timetabling are unified across the student population.

Notes

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