

English Studies, Imaginative Writing and the National Student Survey 2009



Series Editor: Jane Gawthrope

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Number 24 • November 2010

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BACKGROUND

The following report presents results from an analysis of the 2009 National Student Survey (NSS). The analysis was conducted through the disaggregation of a number of sub-categories from the NSS dataset: English Studies, Imaginative Writing, Humanities and Regional Groupings. On the basis of this disaggregation, average responses per question and scale were generated for these sub categories.

This report presents the results of this analysis through comparative tables and charts which aim to foreground and elucidate tendencies in the data which will be of interest to those working within both English Studies and Imaginative Writing. These are supplemented by a written analysis of the results portrayed. The report also includes a methodological discussion of the NSS and an overview of practical considerations for heads of department seeking to formulate strategic responses to NSS results.

It should be noted that the use of the terms 'English Studies' and 'Imaginative Writing' stems from the disciplinary categories which structure the NSS dataset. For more information about the Joint Academic Coding System (JACS) please see the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) website.

The National Student Survey

The NSS questionnaire encompasses 22 questions grouped into 7 scales. Each question offers five choices from "definitely agree" to "definitely disagree", as well as "not applicable". These responses are recorded numerically with 1 representing "definitely disagree" and 5 representing "definitely agree". Figure 1 shows the questionnaire broken down by scale and question.

The questionnaire also includes open-ended response questions inviting respondents to record 'positive' and 'negative' features of their university experience which they would like to highlight. However this aspect is beyond the scope of the present report.

Figure 1: NSS Scale and Question Content

Scale	Question	Question Content
1 Teaching and Learning	1	Staff are good at explaining things.
	2	Staff have made the subject interesting.
	3	Staff are enthusiastic about what they are teaching.
	4	The course is intellectually stimulating.
2 Assessment and Feedback	5	The criteria used in marking have been clear in advance.
	6	Assessment arrangements and marking have been fair.
	7	Feedback on my work has been prompt.
	8	I have received detailed comments on my work.
	9	Feedback on my work has helped me clarify things I did not understand.
3 Academic Support	10	I have received sufficient advice and support with my studies.
	11	I have been able to contact staff when I needed to.
	12	Good advice was available when I needed to make study choices.

4 Organization and Management	13	he timetable works efficiently as far as my activities are concerned.
	14	Any changes in the course or teaching have been communicated effectively.
	15	The course is well organized and is running smoothly.
5 Learning Resources	16	The library resources and services are good enough for my needs.
	17	I have been able to access general IT resources when I needed to.
	18	I have been able to access specialized equipment, facilities or rooms when I needed to.
6 Personal Development	19	The course has helped me present myself with confidence.
	20	My communication skills have improved.
	21	As a result of the course, I feel confident in tackling unfamiliar problems.
7 Overall Satisfaction	22	Overall, I am satisfied with the quality of the course.

Methodological Issues

The NSS has been conducted on an annual basis since 2005. It asks final year undergraduates to provide feedback on their courses through completion of the questionnaire presented in Figure 1. All eligible students receive an e-mail inviting them to complete the questionnaire online. The independent company (Ipsos MORI) conducting the survey then follow up with those who do not respond to the e-mail in order to ensure the scope and rigor of the research. This takes place through post and then telephone. The results of the survey are published on the website Unistats.com, as well as being made available to relevant organizations via HEFCE and the Higher Education Academy (HEA).

There are three main methodological points to consider when evaluating the strengths and weaknesses of the NSS dataset as a tool for quality enhancement:

1. The data is about student *experience* of the learning environment. This experience is limited, in the sense that students lack full insight into the objective features of this environment¹. Responses may be shaped by a lack of personal understanding of the educational value of a particular aspect of the course or unrealistic estimations of prevailing standards within comparable institutions. Furthermore response will usually reflect partial knowledge of the institution itself e.g. a student may give low scores for scale 1 questions on the basis of having been taught by an unrepresentative series of unenthusiastic staff members in an otherwise exemplary department.

¹This claim applies beyond the student population. Staff also lack full insight, albeit in different ways. This reciprocal lack of full penetration into the characteristics of the learning environment is why the NSS stands as a valuable addition to anecdotal evidence and personal experience.

-
2. It is also important to note the potential variability in the learning styles of students and the role this plays in shaping responses. For instance two students with different orientations in relation to feedback (e.g. one prefers clear and concise feedback while the other prefers abundant and thorough feedback) are likely to give different answers to scale 2 (“Assessment and Feedback”) questions in spite of inhabiting the same learning environment. Given the heterogeneity of the student population, it is unavoidable that different respondents interpret the questions in different ways and that these differences may reflect divergent learning needs which educators must be sensitive to.
 3. The experience students have of their learning environment will be shaped by its actual characteristics. So while it is important to recognize the aforementioned limitations of the data, it is important not to lose sight of the objective referents of questionnaire responses. Though responses are mediated through the subjective perceptions of students, it is still the case that students possess valuable insight into the characteristics of their learning environment. As Prosser (2005) puts it, “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.”

While there are limitations to the data these should not be overstated. The scope of the NSS makes it a uniquely valuable resource for those seeking to enhance the student learning experience. All finalists at participating universities are invited to complete the questionnaire through a multi-stage process (e-mail, post, telephone) which aims to minimise non-response. Furthermore the survey is conducted in a standardised fashion across the UK each year by a hugely experienced market research company. As such the data can be taken to be as rigorous a sample of student opinion as is effectively feasible.

Even so, it is imperative that the data be interpreted in a way which is informed by an appreciation of the aforementioned methodological issues. An attempt to understand the data in terms of a single scale of student satisfaction would fall short in this respect: it would presuppose a uniformity in respondents and their responses that could not be justified, as well as obscuring the knowledge able to be recovered from responses on the other six scales. Similarly courses should not be ranked hierarchically on the basis of NSS results, as the differences between particular courses are often very small. Furthermore it is a mistake to compare departments directly because of the varying student demographics and institutional characteristics represented on the NSS.

Prosser (2005) suggests that interpreting NSS results as satisfaction ratings can be counter-productive. He argues that the data is much more productively interpreted as indicators of how students experience their university and department as a context for learning. Such an understanding is best placed to generate practical insights from data in spite of its methodological weaknesses. Through identification of trends within a learning environment and comparative tendencies across them, it is possible for the NSS to ‘flag up’ relative strengths and weaknesses for particular disciplines, institutions or mission groups.

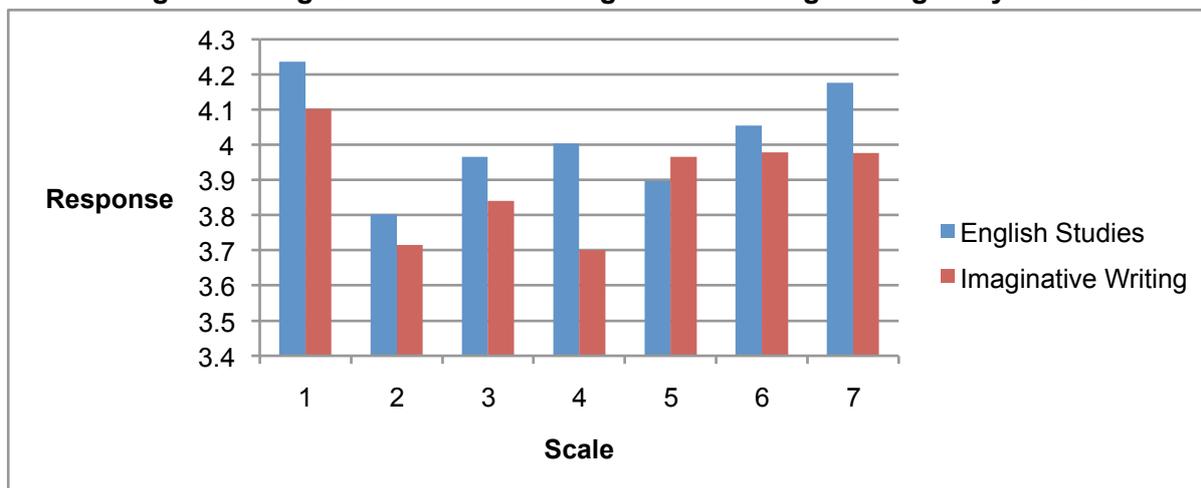
As Williams and Kane (2008) argue, “data from such high-level surveys is best used for indicative purposes to identify areas for further investigation”.

Through analysis of the NSS it is possible to identify apparent issues which invite further inquiry. While it is possible to construct hypotheses to explain patterning in NSS results, these are best construed as starting points for investigation rather than conclusive insights into student experience. These issues are discussed further in Appendix 1.

ENGLISH STUDIES AND IMAGINATIVE WRITING RESULTS

The following section presents average responses for English Studies and Imaginative Writing courses across all institutions. In doing so, it aims to identify overall tendencies concerning student learning experiences within both disciplines. However it should be noted that 109 English Studies courses have their average results recorded on the public dataset relative to only 29 Imaginative Writing courses². Figure 2 presents the results by scale while Figure 3 present these results by question.

Figure 2: English Studies and Imaginative Writing Averages By Scale



Scale 1	Scale 2	Scale 3	Scale 4	Scale 5	Scale 6	Scale 7
Teaching and Learning	Assessment and Feedback	Academic Support	Organization and Management	Learning Resources	Personal Development	Overall Satisfaction

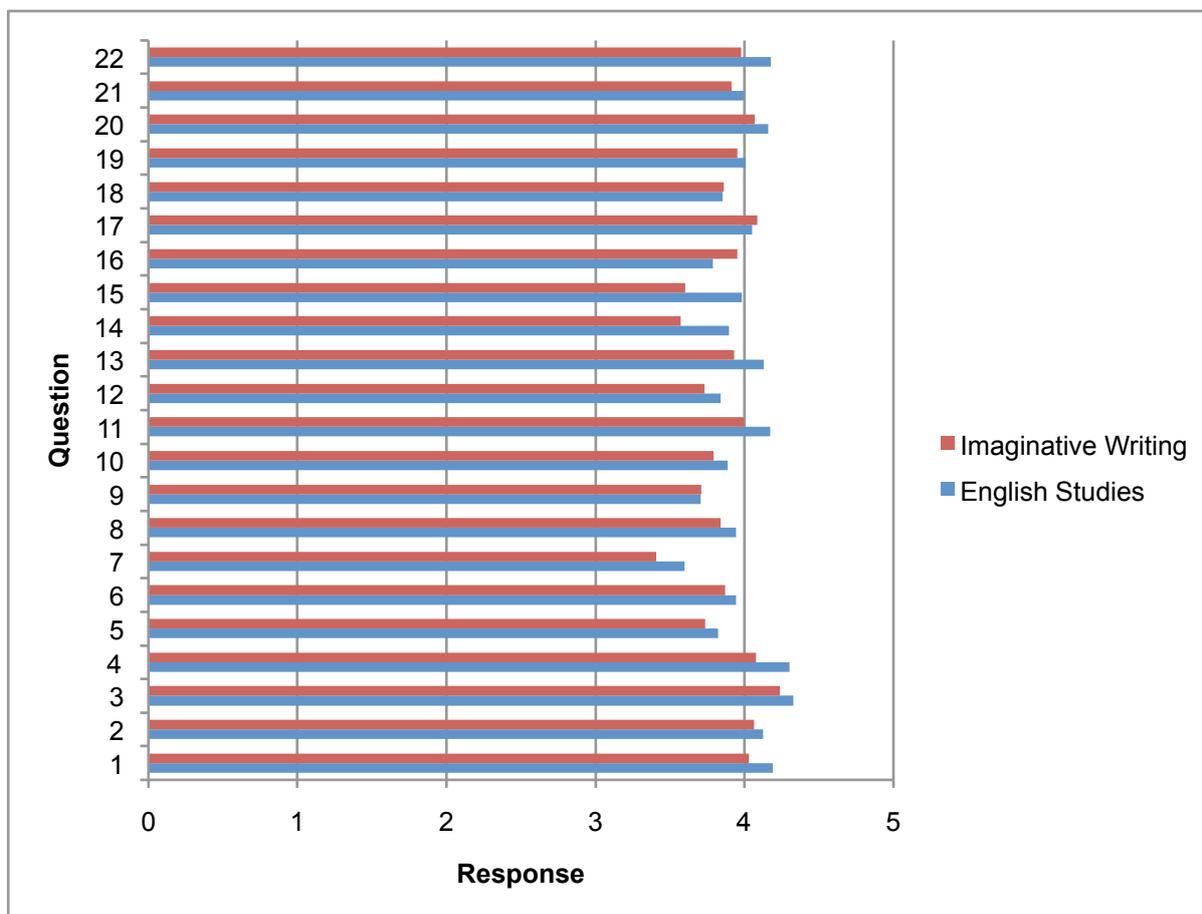
English Studies courses have a higher overall average response compared to Imaginative Writing on every scale apart from scale 5 (“Learning Resources”). Particularly striking differentials can be seen on scale 1 (“Teaching and Learning”) and scale 7 (“Overall Satisfaction”).

English Studies receives its highest overall average responses on scale 1 (“Teaching and Learning”) and scale 7 (“Overall Satisfaction”). It receives its lowest on scale 2 (“Assessment and Feedback”) and scale 5 (“Learning Resources”).

² While this will obviously correspond to a larger number of students, the public data set does not record how many respondents there are from each course. However it is worth noting the publication threshold of 50% response rate and 23 responses, below which point the current year’s data is aggregated with the past year’s data.

Imaginative Writing receives its highest overall average responses on scale 1 (“Teaching and Learning”). It receives its lowest overall average responses on scale 2 (“Assessment and Feedback”) and scale 4 (“Organization and Management”).

Figure 3: English Studies and Imaginative Writing Averages By Question



English Studies receives higher average scores than Imaginative Writing on all questions other than question 9 (“Feedback on my work has helped me clarify things I did not understand”), question 16 (“The Library Resources are good enough for my needs”) and question 17 (“I have been able to access general IT resources when I needed to”). Average scores for the two disciplines are tied on question 18 (“I have been able to access specialised equipment, facilities or rooms when I needed to”).

The biggest differentials between the two can be seen on question 14 (“Any changes in the course or teaching have been communicated effectively”) and question 15 (“The course is well organized and is running smoothly”), suggesting a relative weakness for Imaginative Writing.

English Studies and Gender

Figure 4 to Figure 10 represent average responses for English Studies students disaggregated by gender. It should be noted that these were calculated in a different way to the results presented elsewhere in this report. Whereas other results were calculated on the basis of average responses for each course, it was necessary to produce these figures through the analysis of individual responses because the gender data was only available within a dataset that had not already been pre-aggregated by institution and degree course. This accounts for any differential that may be observed between these figures and those presented elsewhere in the report.

Average male scores are higher than average female scores on fifteen questions: 1, 2, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12, 13, 16, 17, 18, 19 and 21. However with the exception of question 16 (“The library resources and services are good enough for my needs”) and question 17 (“I have been able to access general IT resources when I needed to”) the gender differentials are small.

Scale 1	Scale 2	Scale 3	Scale 4	Scale 5	Scale 6	Scale 7
Teaching and Learning	Assessment and Feedback	Academic Support	Organization and Management	Learning Resources	Personal Development	Overall Satisfaction

Figure 4: English Studies by Gender (Scale 1 – Teaching and Learning)

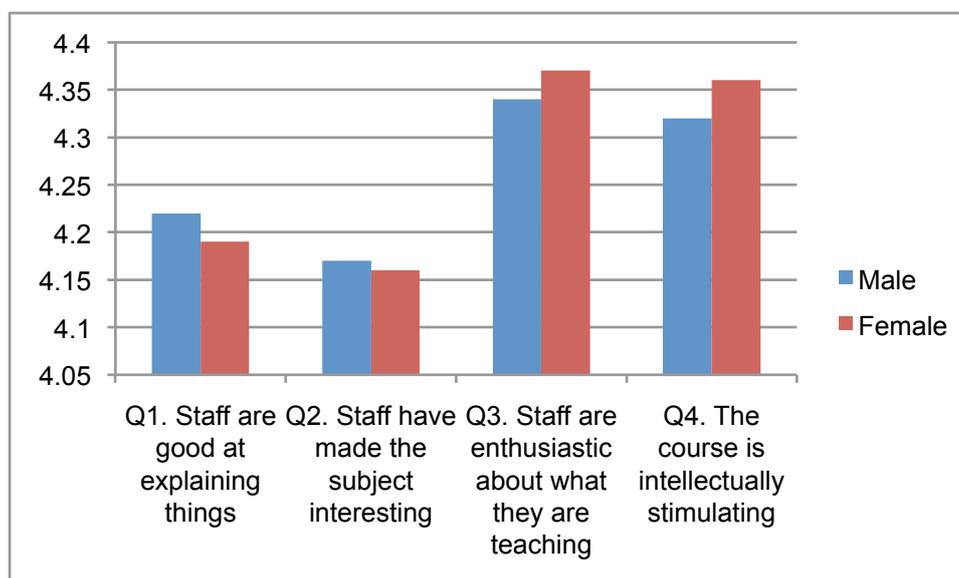


Figure 5: English Studies by Gender (Scale 2 – Assessment and Feedback)

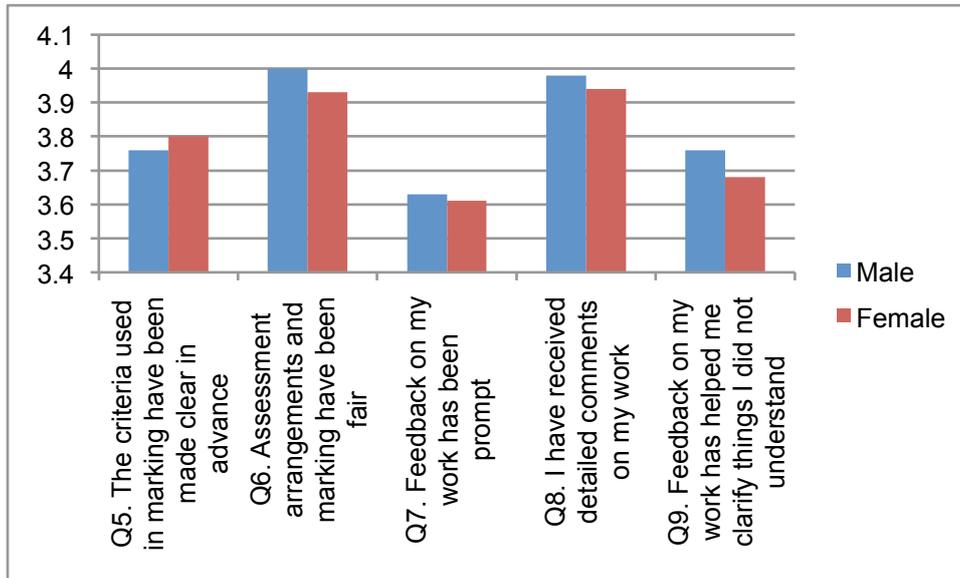


Figure 6: English Studies by Gender (Scale 3 – Academic Support)

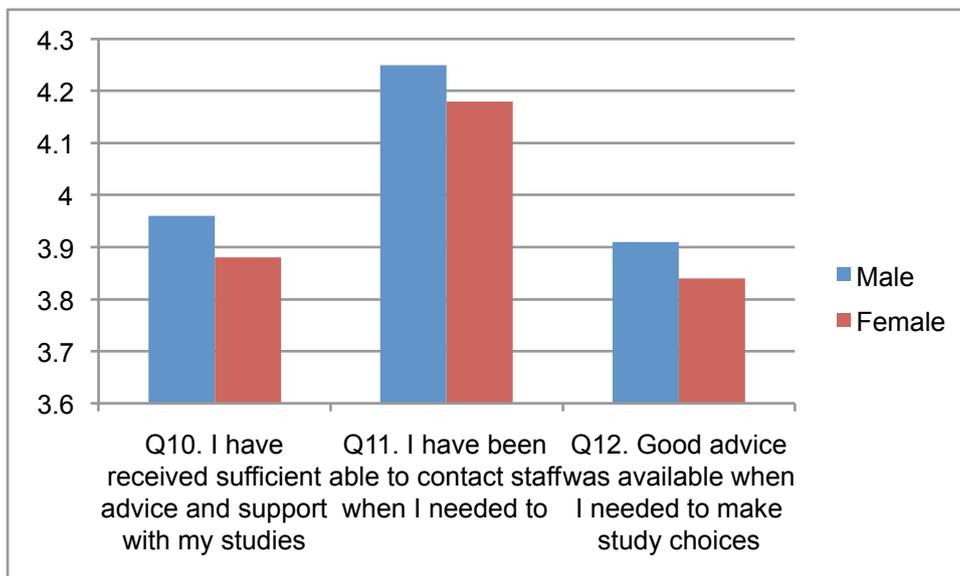


Figure 7: English Studies by Gender (Scale 4 – Organization and Management)

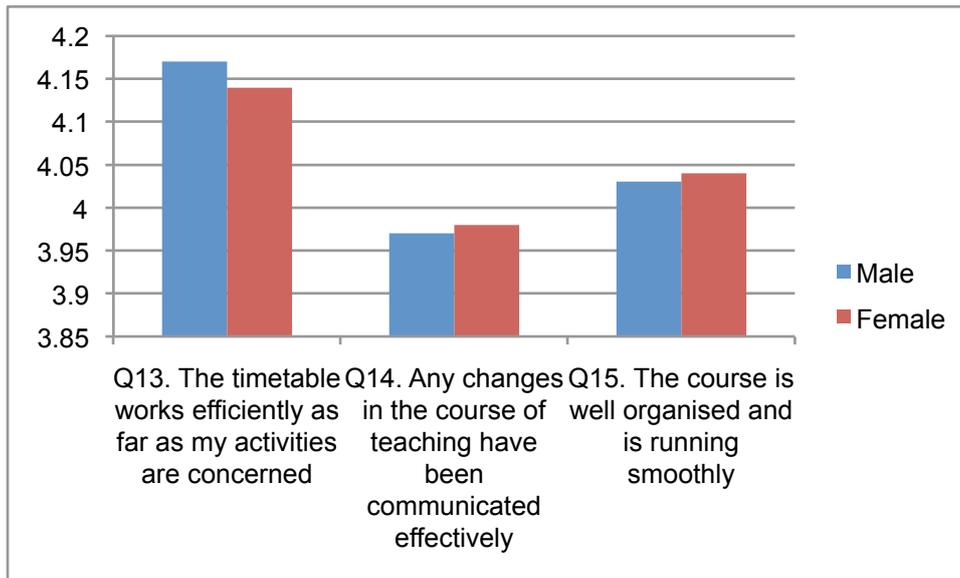


Figure 8: English Studies by Gender (Scale 5 – Learning Resources)

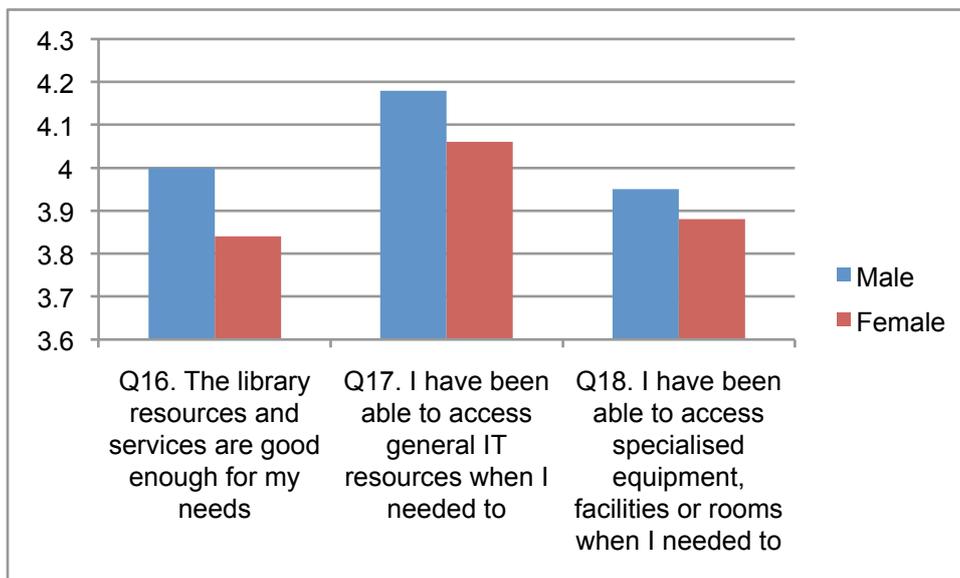


Figure 9: English Studies by Gender (Scale 6 – Personal Development)

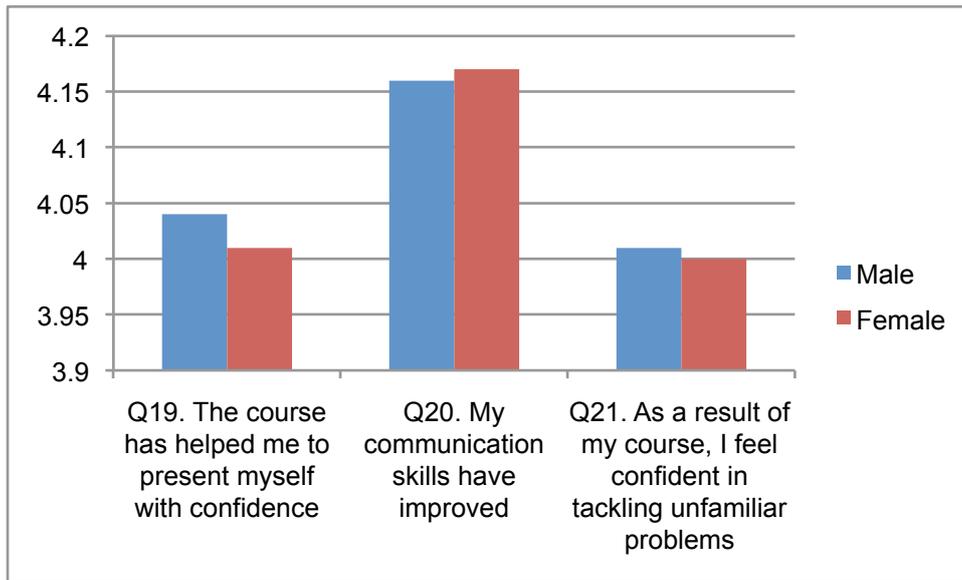
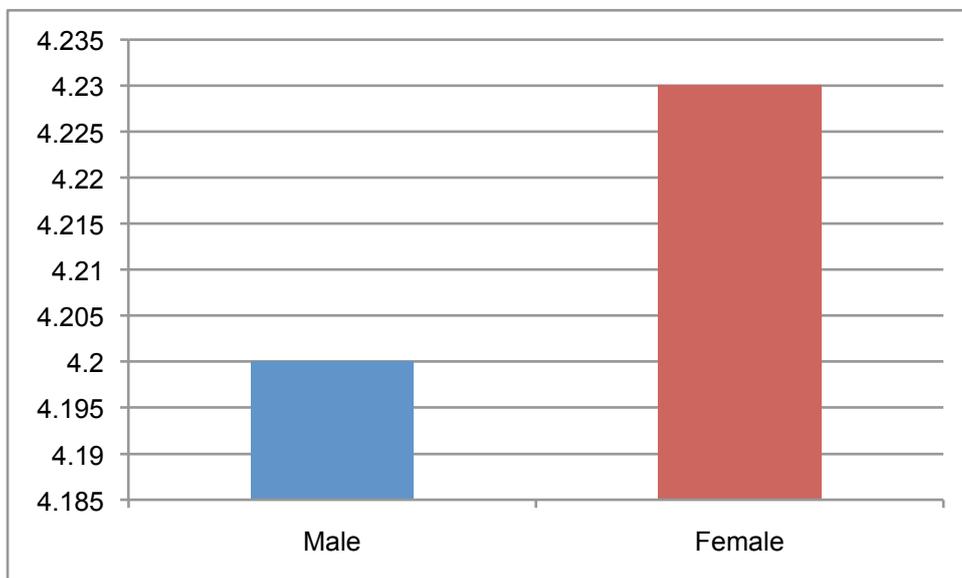


Figure 10: English Studies by Gender (Scale 7 – Overall Satisfaction)



Imaginative Writing and Gender

Figure 11 to Figure 17 represent average responses for Imaginative Writing students disaggregated by gender. Average female scores are higher than average male scores on every question apart from question 19 (“The course has helped me present myself with confidence”) and question 21 (“As a result of the course, I feel confident in tackling unfamiliar problems”). Particularly striking gender differentials can be seen on question 3 (“Staff are enthusiastic about what they are teaching”), question 4 (“The course is intellectually stimulating”) and question 10 (“I have received sufficient advice and support with my studies”).

Scale 1	Scale 2	Scale 3	Scale 4	Scale 5	Scale 6	Scale 7
Teaching and Learning	Assessment and Feedback	Academic Support	Organization and Management	Learning Resources	Personal Development	Overall Satisfaction

Figure 11: Imaginative Writing by Gender (Scale 1 – Teaching and Learning)

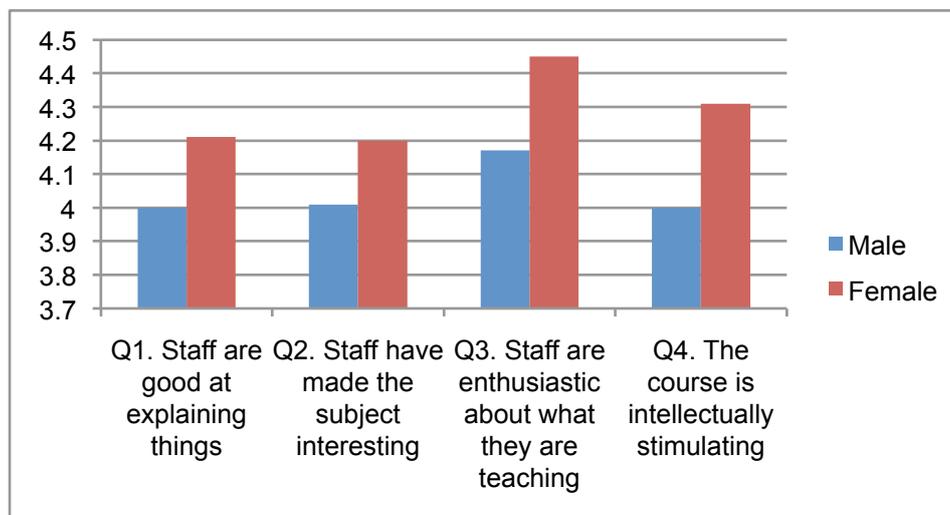


Figure 12: Imaginative Writing by Gender (Scale 2 – Assessment and Feedback)

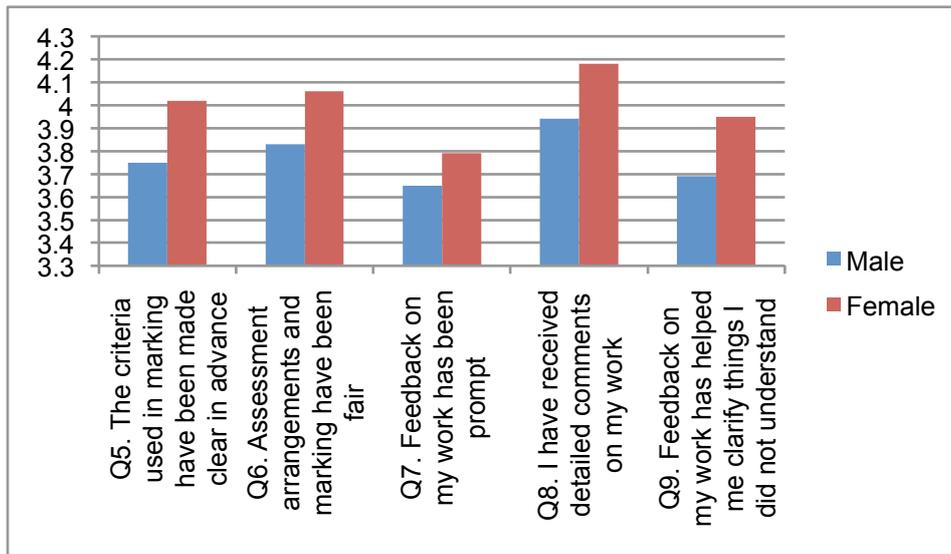


Figure 13: Imaginative Writing by Gender (Scale 3 – Academic Support)

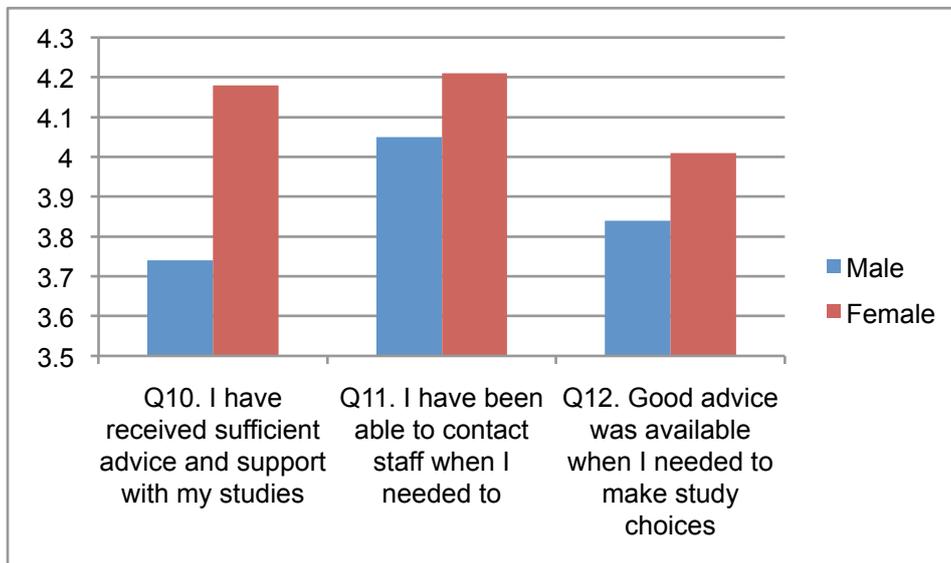


Figure 14: Imaginative Writing by Gender (Scale 4 – Organization and Management)

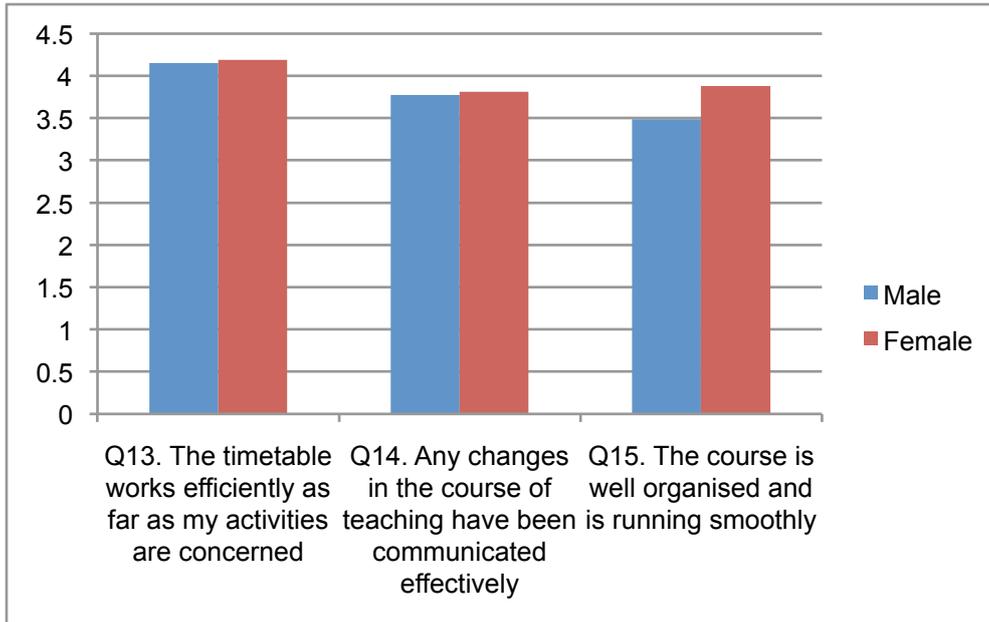


Figure 15: Imaginative Writing by Gender (Scale 5 – Learning Resources)

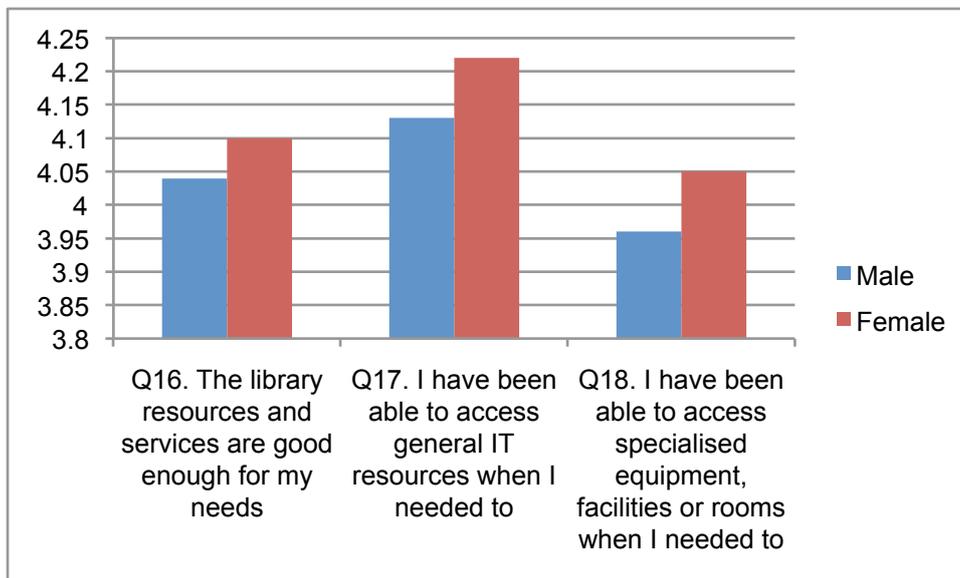


Figure 16: Imaginative Writing by Gender (Scale 6 – Personal Development)

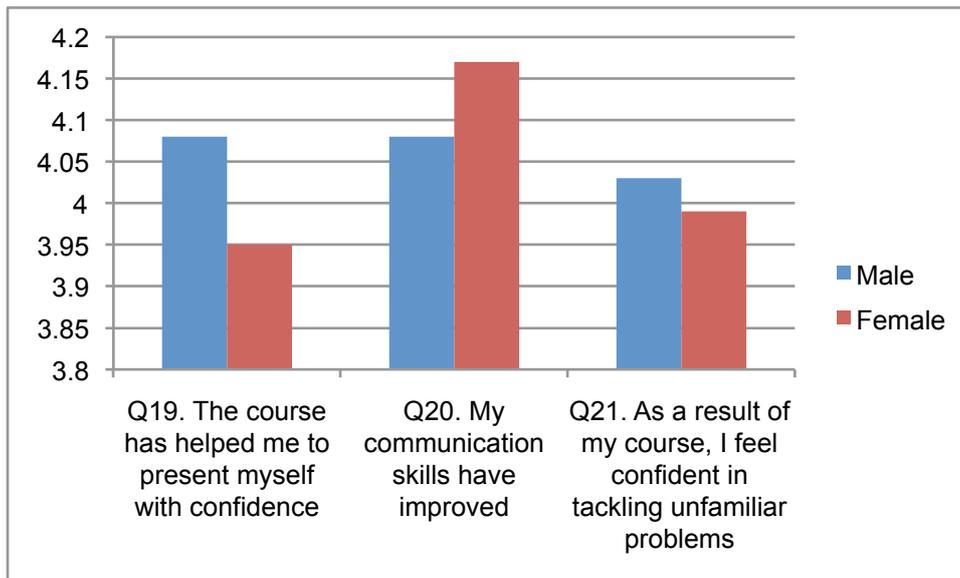
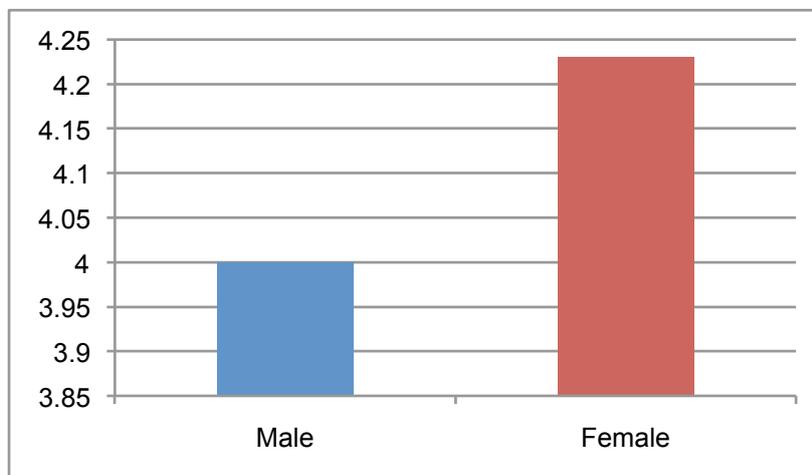


Figure 17: Imaginative Writing by Gender (Scale 7 – Overall Satisfaction)

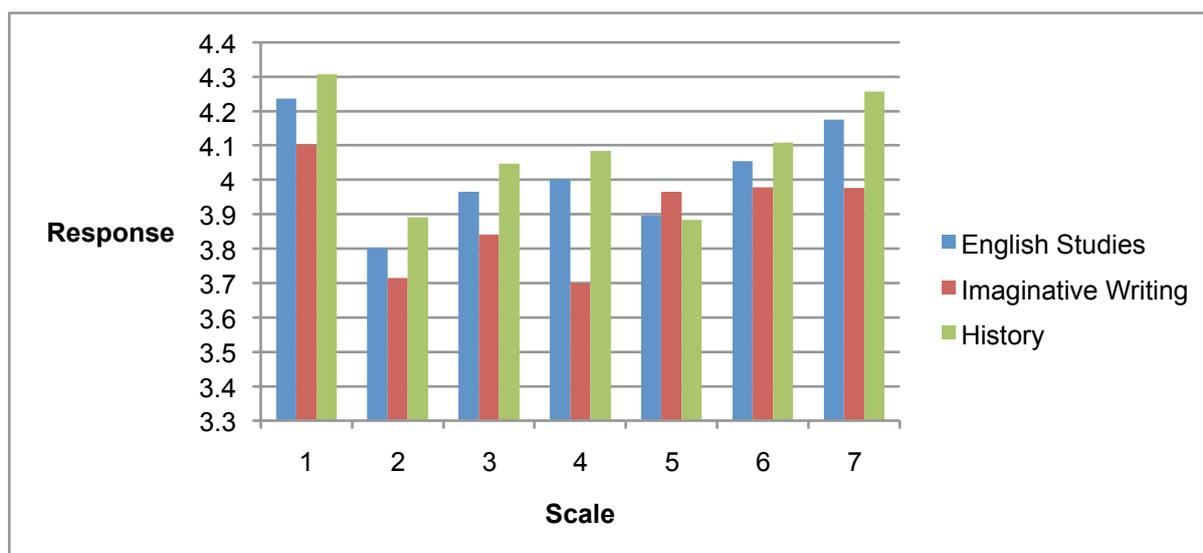


ENGLISH STUDIES AND IMAGINATIVE WRITING COMPARED TO HISTORY RESULTS

This section offers a comparative presentation of average responses for English Studies and Imaginative Writing compared to those for History. History was selected because it is another humanities subject, also widely taught at A Level, of a broadly similar size to English in terms of student numbers.

Figure 18 represents average responses for the three disciplines by scale. Figure 19 represents average responses for the three disciplines by question.

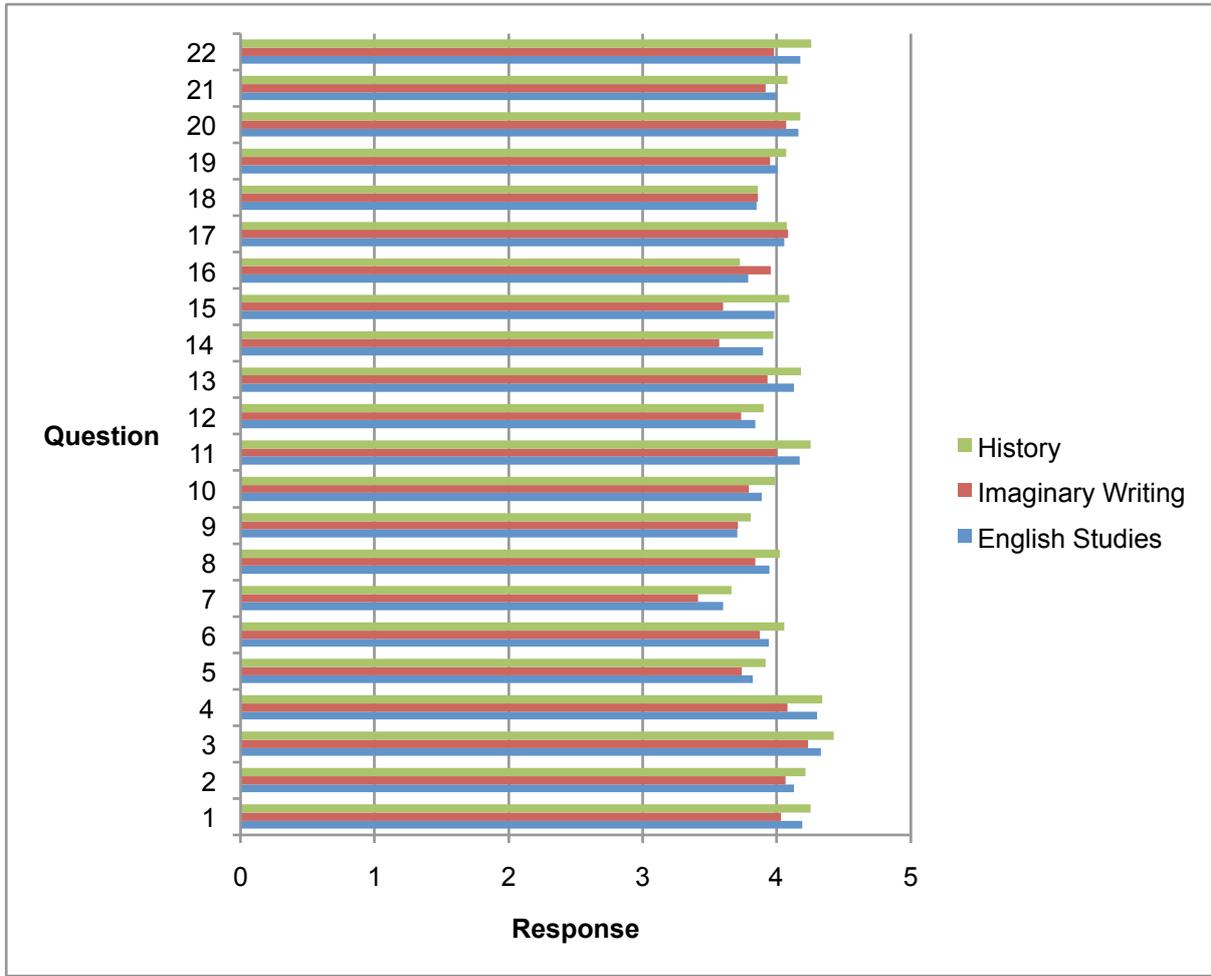
Figure 18: English Studies, Imaginative Writing and History Averages By Scale



Scale 1	Scale 2	Scale 3	Scale 4	Scale 5	Scale 6	Scale 7
Teaching and Learning	Assessment and Feedback	Academic Support	Organization and Management	Learning Resources	Personal Development	Overall Satisfaction

English Studies and Imaginative Writing receive lower average scores than History on all scales. However with English Studies the differences on each scale are relatively minor. With regards to Imaginative Writing, significant differentials can be seen on scale 4 (“Organization and Management”) and scale 7 (“Overall Satisfaction”). Imaginative Writing receives a higher score than both English Studies and History on scale 5 (“Learning Resources”)

Figure 19: English Studies, Imaginative Writing and History Averages By Question



Imaginative Writing receives the highest average responses on question 16 (“The library resources and services are good enough for my needs”), question 17 (“I have been able to access general IT resources when I needed to”) and question 18 (“I have been able to access specialized equipment, facilities or rooms when I needed to”). This tendency in scale 5 (“Learning Resources”) relative to English Studies, History and the Humanities overall³ may reflect the way in which Imaginative Writing courses typically do not make extensive demands on the availability of texts either in libraries or online.

On all other questions History receives the highest average responses. Particularly high differentials can be seen relative to English Studies on question 6 (“Assessment arrangements and marking have been fair”), question 10 (“I have received sufficient advice and support with my studies”) and question 15 (“The course is well organized and is running smoothly”). Particularly high differentials can be seen relative to Imaginative Writing on question 14 (“Any changes in the course or teaching have been communicated effectively”) and question 15 (“The course is well organized and is running smoothly”).

³ See Figure 20 and Figure 21 below.

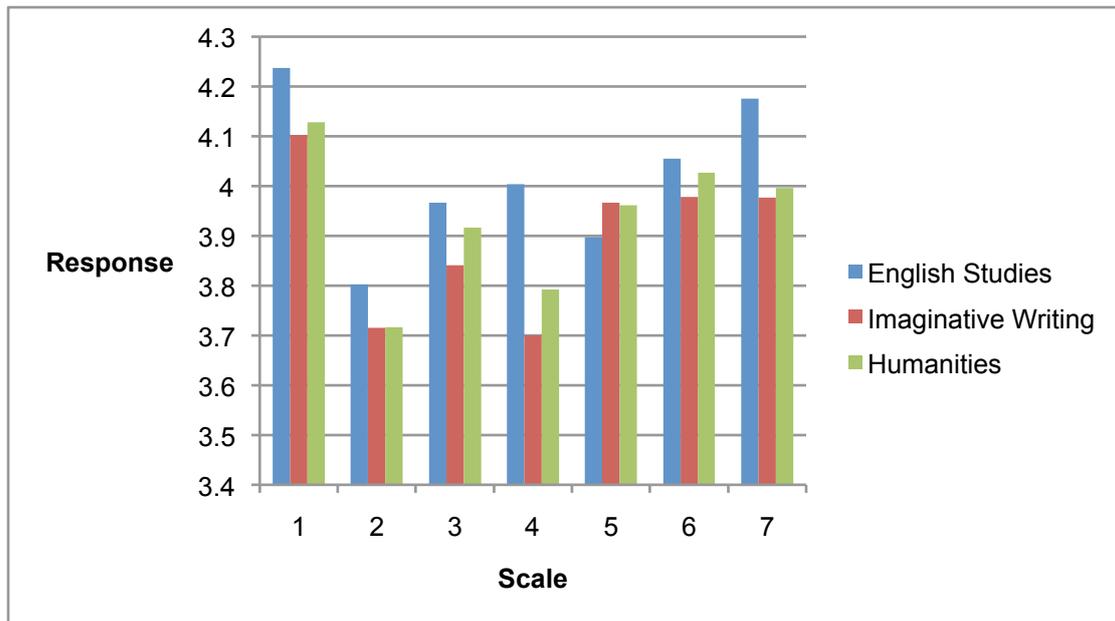
ENGLISH STUDIES AND IMAGINATIVE WRITING COMPARED TO OVERALL HUMANITIES RESULTS

This section offers a comparative presentation of average results for English Studies and Imaginative Writing compared to the Humanities overall. There is no clearly defined Humanities sub category on the NSS. For the purposes of this analysis Humanities was taken to be constituted by the following subject and disciplinary categories from the NSS:

1. Archaeology
2. Others in Historical and Philosophical Studies
3. English-based studies
4. European Languages and Area studies
5. Other Languages and Area studies
6. Philosophy, Theology and Religious studies
7. Art and Design
8. Performing Arts
9. Other Creative Arts

Figure 20 shows English Studies, Imaginative Writing and Humanities averages by scale. English Studies receives higher average responses on every scale apart from scale 5 (“Learning Resources”). Particularly large differentials can be seen on scale 4 (“Organization and Management”) and scale 7 (“Overall Satisfaction”). Imaginative Writing receives marginally higher averages on scale 5 (“Learning Resources”), ties with Humanities averages on scale 2 (“Assessment and Feedback”) and otherwise receives lower average responses per scale than both Humanities and English Studies.

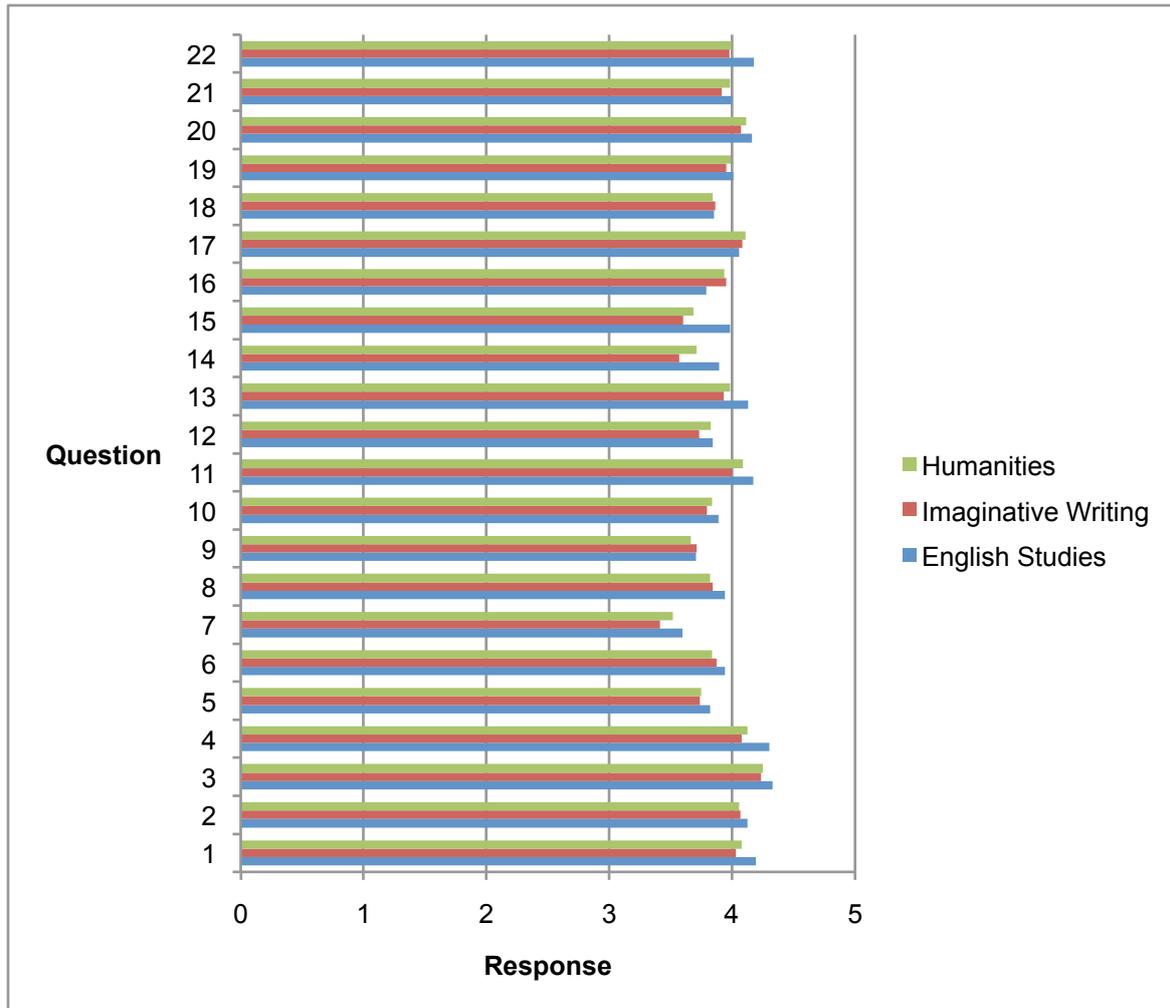
Figure 20: English Studies, Imaginative Writing and Humanities Averages By Scale



Scale 1	Scale 2	Scale 3	Scale 4	Scale 5	Scale 6	Scale 7
Teaching and Learning	Assessment and Feedback	Academic Support	Organization and Management	Learning Resources	Personal Development	Overall Satisfaction

Figure 21 shows English Studies, Imaginative Writing and Humanities averages by question. Imaginative Writing received the highest average scores on question 9 (“Feedback on my work has helped me clarify things I did not understand”), question 16 (“The library resources and services are good enough for my needs”) and question 18 (“I have been able to access specialized equipment, facilities or rooms when I needed to”). Humanities received the highest average score on question 17 (“The library resources and services are good enough for my needs”) by a small margin. Otherwise English Studies received the highest average scores on all questions. Particular strengths relative to overall Humanities were recorded for English Studies on question 4 (“The course is intellectually stimulating”), question 15 (“The course is well organized and is running smoothly”) and question 22 (“Overall, I am satisfied with the quality of this course”).

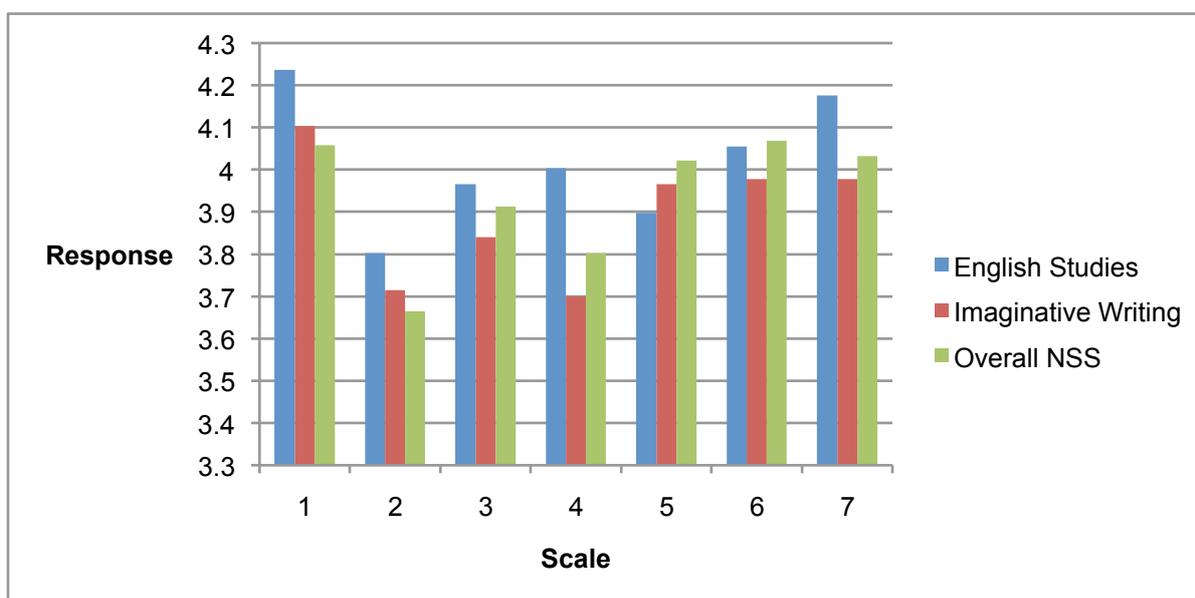
Figure 21: English Studies, Imaginative Writing and Humanities Averages By Question



ENGLISH STUDIES AND IMAGINATIVE WRITING COMPARED TO OVERALL NSS RESULTS

This section offers a comparative presentation of average results for English Studies and Imaginative writing compared to average results for all disciplines across the NSS. Figure 22 shows English Studies and Imaginative Writing results compared to overall NSS results by scale. Figure 23 shows English Studies and Imaginative Writing results compared to overall NSS results by question.

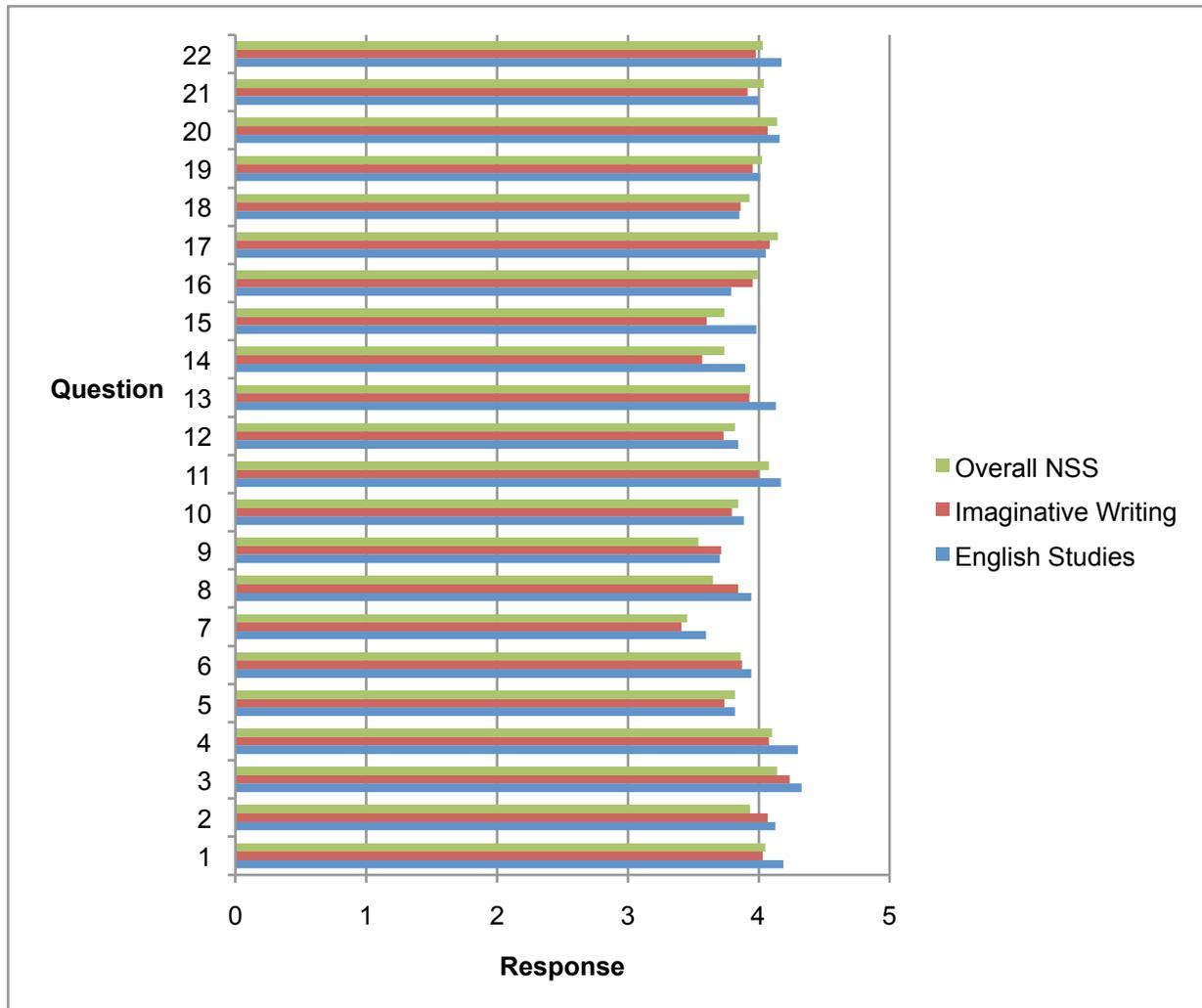
Figure 22: English Studies, Imaginative Writing and Overall NSS Averages By Scale



Scale 1	Scale 2	Scale 3	Scale 4	Scale 5	Scale 6	Scale 7
Teaching and Learning	Assessment and Feedback	Academic Support	Organization and Management	Learning Resources	Personal Development	Overall Satisfaction

English Studies receives higher average responses on all scales apart from scale 5 (“Learning Resources”) where it is lower than both Imaginative Writing and overall NSS. Particular strengths are suggested on scale 4 (“Organization and Management”) and scale 7 (“Overall Satisfaction”). Imaginative Writing receives a higher average response than English Studies on scale 5 (“Learning Resources”). It also receives a higher average response than overall NSS responses on scale 1 (“Teaching and Learning”) and scale 2 (“Assessment and Feedback”). However it otherwise receives lower average responses than the overall NSS with the largest differentials being recorded on scale 4 (“Organization and Management”) and scale 6 (“Personal Development”).

Figure 23: English Studies, Imaginative Writing and Overall NSS Averages By Question



English Studies receives highest average responses on the majority of questions. Particular differentials relative to overall NSS responses can be seen on question 8 (“I have received detailed comments on my work”) and question 15 (“The course is well organized and running smoothly”). Imaginative Writing receives the highest average score on question 9 (“Feedback on my work has helped me clarify things I did not understand”).

Average overall NSS responses are higher on question 16 (“The library resources and services are good enough for my needs”), question 17 (“I have been able to access general IT resources when I needed to”), question 18 (“I have been able to access specialised equipment, facilities or rooms when I needed to”), question 19 (“The course has helped me present myself with confidence”) and question 21 (“As a result of the course, I feel confident in tackling unfamiliar problems”).

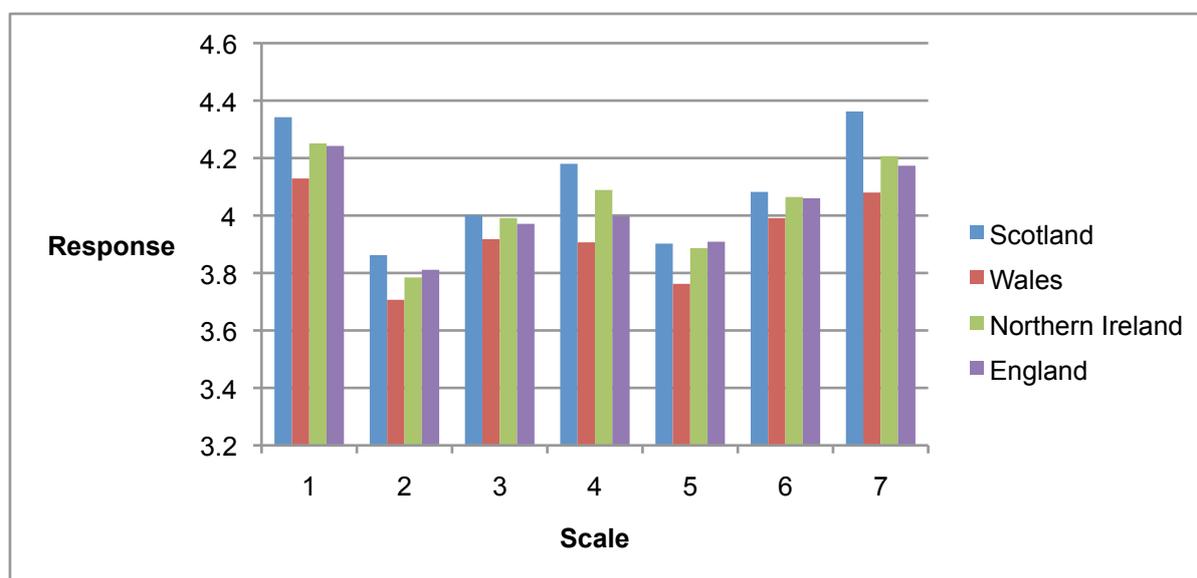
ENGLISH STUDIES BROKEN DOWN BY REGION

This section offers a comparative analysis of average responses for English Studies disaggregated by region. Figure 24 represents these disaggregated responses by scale and Figure 25 represents them by question.

Unfortunately only a handful of Imaginative Writing courses outside of England were present in the NSS dataset: none in Scotland, one in Wales, one in Northern Ireland. This may be a consequence of not all institutions in the UK being represented in the NSS. It may also stem from the majority of such courses being based in England. However as it stands the data available is insufficient to support a comparative analysis and therefore this has not been included in the present report.

English Studies Regional Results

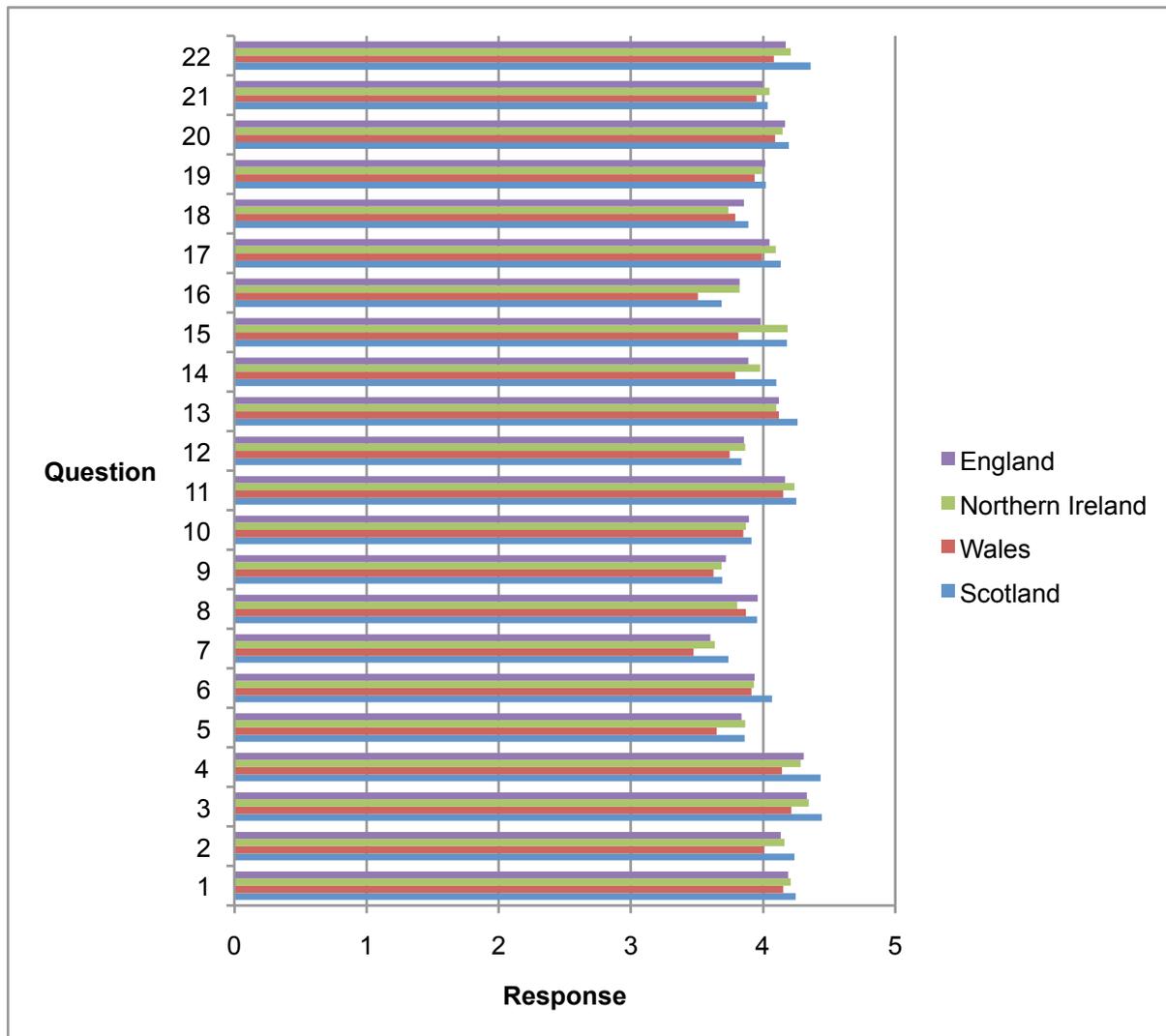
Figure 24: English Studies Averages By Scale (Regional)



Scale 1	Scale 2	Scale 3	Scale 4	Scale 5	Scale 6	Scale 7
Teaching and Learning	Assessment and Feedback	Academic Support	Organization and Management	Learning Resources	Personal Development	Overall Satisfaction

English Studies courses in Scotland receive higher average responses on all but one scales. This is scale 5 (“Learning Resources”) where courses in England receive marginally higher average responses. Differentials between Scotland and other regions are particularly significant on scale 7 (“Overall Satisfaction”). English Studies courses in Northern Ireland receive the second highest average responses on scale 1 (“Teaching and Learning”), scale 3 (“Academic Support”), scale 4 (“Organization and Management”) and scale 7 (“Overall Satisfaction”). English Studies courses in Wales receive lowest average responses on all scales.

Figure 25: English Studies Averages By Question (Regional)



English Studies courses in Scotland receive the highest average responses on fifteen out of the twenty two questions. Particular strengths can be seen on question 14 (“Any changes in the course or teaching have been communicated effectively”) and question 22 (“Overall, I am satisfied with the quality of the course”).

English Studies courses at Northern Irish institutions receive the highest average responses on question 5 (“The criteria used for marking have been clear in advance”), question 12 (“Good advice was available when I needed to make study choices”), question 15 (“The course is well organized and is running smoothly”) and question 21 (“As a result of the course, I feel confident in tackling unfamiliar problems”).

English studies courses at Northern Irish and English institutions receive the joint highest average responses on question 16 (“The library resources and services are good enough for my needs”). Courses at English institutions also receive the highest average scores on question 8 (“I have received detailed comments on my work”) and question 9 (“Feedback on my work has helped me clarify things I did not understand”).

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

1. English Studies courses receive higher average responses than Imaginative Writing courses on every scale apart from scale 5 (“Learning Resources”).
2. Striking differentials between English Studies and Imaginative Writing courses can be seen on scale 1 (“Teaching and Learning”) and scale 7 (“Overall Satisfaction”).
3. Within English Studies male students give higher average responses than female students on 15 of the 22 questions. However with the exception of question 16 (“The library resources and services are good enough for my needs”) and question 17 (“I have been able to access general IT resources when I needed to”) these differentials are small.
4. Within Imaginative Writing female students give higher average responses than male students on all but two questions. Particularly striking gender differentials can be seen on question 3 (“Staff are enthusiastic about what they are teaching”), question 4 (“The course is intellectually stimulating”) and question 10 (“I have received sufficient advice and support with my studies”).
5. Comparative analysis suggests that scale 5 (“Learning Resources”) is a weakness of English Studies courses relative to other Humanities subjects and NSS results overall.
6. English Studies performs well relative to other Humanities subjects. Particularly large differentials can be seen on scale 4 (“Organization and Management”) and scale 7 (“Overall Satisfaction”).
7. Comparison to overall NSS results suggests particular strengths for English Studies on scale 4 (“Organization and Management”) and scale 7 (“Overall Satisfaction”).
8. Imaginative Writing receives a higher average response than overall NSS responses on scale 1 (“Teaching and Learning”) and scale 2 (“Assessment and Feedback”).
9. English Studies courses in Scotland receive higher average responses on all but one scale. This is scale 5 (“Learning Resources”) where courses in England receive marginally higher average responses. Differentials between Scotland and other regions are particularly significant on scale 7 (“Overall Satisfaction”).
10. English Studies courses in Northern Ireland receive the second highest average responses on scale 1 (“Teaching and Learning”), scale 3 (“Academic Support”), scale 4 (“Organization and Management”) and scale 7 (“Overall Satisfaction”).
11. English Studies courses in Wales receive lowest average responses on all scales.

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Prosser, M. (2005) Why we shouldn't use student surveys of teaching as satisfaction ratings. York, The Higher Education Academy.

APPENDIX 1 – SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER INQUIRY

In the earlier methodological discussion it was suggested that the NSS is best used to ‘flag up’ potential issues and highlight areas for further investigation. However doing so requires an understanding of the inferences that are supportable by the data and those that are not. This in turn relates to the methodological points discussed earlier in the report:

1. Student responses are shaped by their knowledge and expectations of institutional processes. The understanding which students have of such processes are likely to be partial at best. Similarly the standards they bring to bear on assessing such processes are not necessarily realistic or well informed.
2. The student population cannot be treated as homogenous. Nor can it be assumed that respondents who offer the same response to a question mean the same thing by it. Student responses are shaped by their own particular learning needs and educational experiences.
3. Nonetheless any student’s experiences of a learning environment will be shaped by its actual characteristics and it is through understanding this relationship that practical strategies for improvement can be derived. As Prosser (2005) writes, “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.”

It is necessary to exercise caution when making inferences on the basis of NSS scores. Both within disciplinary areas and at particular institutions, NSS data should be seen as identifying tendencies in the perceptions and experiences of students *as they report them* at the end of their degree. While the survey produces quantitative data (i.e. numerical scores) it must not be forgotten that these represent codifications of rich personal experiences. Each student brings to bear their own personal needs and a unique learning biography when responding to NSS questions. As such the uniformity of the questions and response scale utilised in the NSS should not be seen to imply a parallel uniformity in student experience.

The NSS illustrates tendencies in student responses at a particular point in their institutional career. All it can establish is that certain segments of the population surveyed (undergraduate finalists at participating institutions) respond in certain ways when presented with a set of statements asking that they record the extent of their agreement or disagreement. This can certainly stimulate valid probabilistic hypotheses: for example if respondents on a particular course at a particular institution score provision of learning resources at a much lower rate than the average scores for that discipline then it is likely that this group of finalists experience problems in accessing learning resources. However it does not follow that this result is either uniform or generalisable beyond the third year students who respond to the survey. With regards to the former point there may be a range of

different experiences being subsumed under a common response⁴ such that an uniformity in responses cannot be taken to reflect a uniformity in experience. With regards to the latter point any strengths or weaknesses identified might be unique to the situation of finalists, as survey respondents are unlikely to give exactly equal weight to their distant and recent experiences.

It follows from this that inferences should be made on a *comparative* rather than *absolute* basis. The comparisons made should be between subjects with converging rather than diverging characteristics e.g. comparing English Studies with other Humanities subjects rather than with natural sciences. Furthermore *explanation* of the data, as opposed to probabilistic inference, necessitates a focused analysis of the data which both extends beyond the identification of general tendencies and investigates particular issues further through other means.

So for example if a particular department received lower than average scores on scale 2 (“assessment and feedback”) this would highlight a particular area of concern which could be unpacked through scrutiny of average scores for the questions that make up scale 2. As Kane and Williams (2008) suggest, “analysis should go beyond the headline scales, such as ‘assessment and feedback’, to explore reasons for the specific items that cause concern (such as ‘promptness of feedback’) and to relate those to specific institutional contexts. In doing so an anomalous result might be found: the average score for ‘promptness of feedback’ might be significantly lower than the average score for the other constituent questions.

This then poses the question of why there is a tendency for students to respond more negatively in relation to ‘promptness of feedback’ than other aspects of ‘assessment and feedback’ in general. It is at this point that other sources may be drawn upon: institutional data, anecdotal data or further investigation. Institutional data may show that feedback within the department tends to take longer than that within other departments at the university. Furthermore anecdotal data may show that many teaching staff have had students complain that friends and peers in other departments get their assessed work back more quickly than they do themselves. In such a case local knowledge (institutional data and anecdotal data) has been drawn upon to offer a concrete explanation for a trend ‘flagged up’ through analysis of the NSS.

Figure 26 : Sources to draw upon when analysing the NSS

National Student Survey	Other
Results by scale	Institutional data
Results by question	Anecdotal data Further investigation

⁴ Some students may have only experienced difficulties at a few crucial points e.g. exam time. Others may have experienced consistent difficulties throughout their degree. Furthermore the questions refer to the ‘needs’ of students and these are obviously variable. Relatively low scores for provision of learning resources could reflect a student population, motivated by excellent teaching, which constantly seeks to maximise its use of available resources, just as much it could reflect a uncomplicated failure by the institution to meet the needs of students. In this sense the NSS data must be understood as intrinsically *ambivalent*: diverging experiences can shape converging responses and vice versa.

However the two sources of local knowledge might very well prove inconclusive. If this is so then formulating a practical strategy might require additional small-scale research. For instance if the average score for 'promptness of feedback' is significantly lower than that for the other constituent questions within the scale and investigation of institutional and anecdotal data reveals no obvious reasons why students might be dissatisfied in this respect, then an online survey or student focus group becomes a relevant option. While the scope of the NSS means that it is adept at highlighting tendencies, its standardising nature (reducing student experience into a numerical value on a uniform scale) means it is inadequate for gaining insights into the concrete experiences of particular students. This is why follow up research should be considered for those attempting to utilise the NSS as a tool for quality enhancement. There are two main methods which could be feasibly and productively used in this way:

- Online questionnaires can be developed, hosted and disseminated with relative ease through services such as Survey Methods and Survey Monkey. Such services provide a URL link for the resulting questionnaire which can be distributed easily via e-mail or social networking sites. The format of the questionnaire will be familiar to those students who regularly use social networking services. This method allows the collection of qualitative data (student experiences in their *own* words) which is largely beyond the scope of the NSS.
- Informal focus groups may be conducted with staff and/or students. This saves time in relation to one-on-one interviews in so far as that all participants are effectively interviewed at the same time. However more importantly it facilitates insight into the divergences and commonalities within the perceptions and experiences of students and/or staff. As a tool for further inquiry focus groups will work best as informal group conversations aimed at addressing empirical questions emerging from the analysis of the NSS e.g. "why do students seem to feel turnaround times for essays are inadequate?"

If the questions being addressed are relatively unambiguous (e.g. "given students seem to regard the turnaround time for marked essays as unsatisfactory, what would they deem to be an adequate turnaround time?") then it is perfectly feasible for members of staff without research experience to conduct the investigation, provided they approach the process systematically and familiarise themselves with some basic principles of social research. It is also likely to be possible to find postgraduate researchers within social science departments at the institution who are willing to conduct the research for a small fee. Any research student with an ESRC recognised social research MA will be capable of utilising the aforementioned methods to a high standard. Furthermore teaching staff within such departments might be willing to informally consult/advise on an ad hoc basis.



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