

What is learned at university?

The social and organisational mediation of university learning

This project was intended to increase our understanding of the learning outcomes of an increasingly diverse higher education system via an examination of the conceptions of learning, and of professional and personal development, held by the students themselves. It investigated how 'what is learned' differs between different universities and their student populations. By so doing, it is proposing new ways to make sense of the UK's increasingly diversified higher education system.

- Although contexts for learning differ within an increasingly diverse higher education system, there are important commonalities in the outcomes of learning.



Reputational differences between universities may not always correspond to differences in 'what is learned'.

- Students differ in their engagement with higher education, with their subject, with university life and with life outside university, and have different priorities accordingly.



Universities need to understand and take account of a range of student orientations and types of engagement.

- Students often seem to assign more importance to the personal and social dimensions of change than to the academic.



Current policy priorities on knowledge, skills and employability may not be in tune with the priorities of many students.

- In attempting to cope with increasing student diversity, certain institutions are effectively running 'parallel universities' for different types of student.



Diversity requires universities to meet the very different needs of very different types of student.

The research

Background and rationale

The aims of the project were to increase and broaden our understanding of the learning outcomes of an increasingly diverse higher education system, to explore how these are socially and organisationally mediated, and to support their enhancement and fuller recognition.

The project has drawn on the psychological and sociological literatures on student learning, and has involved three conceptions of student learning: as cognitive development, as academic and professional development, and as personal identity and conception of self.

Its two central concepts were social and organisational mediation. By social mediation, we meant the life situations of the students on a particular programme of study individually and collectively, including the social and educational backgrounds of the students as well as features of the student culture within the particular institution or programme. These make up the social context of study.

By organisational mediation, we were referring to the ways in which curriculum knowledge is organised, including the influences of modularity, extended student choice and different modes of study. As the project evolved, a wider notion of organisational mediation was adopted, incorporating a range of structural and cultural features of universities.

The project aimed to explore seven main research questions. They were:

- What conceptions of student learning underpin subject benchmark statements, programme specifications and methods of student assessment?
- What is their relationship to the conceptions of student learning held by students and graduates, and to the changes effected in them?
- How do student identities and conceptions of self affect formal learning outcomes?
- How and to what extent are student identities and conceptions of self formed by the interactions between disciplinary cultures and student experiences inside and outside higher education?
- How and to what extent are student learning outcomes mediated by social and organisational factors?
- To what extent and under what circumstances are student identities and other learning outcomes maintained after leaving higher education?
- How might official conceptions of learning outcomes (formal assessments

Figure 1: Summary of the project

| Three subject areas | Three ways in which learning is mediated | Three conceptions of learning outcomes |
|--|--|--|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Biosciences • Business Studies • Sociology | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • By formal educational curricula and assessment • By the organisational features of the university • By the social context of study | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • As cognitive development • As academic and professional identity • As personal identity and conception of self |

of learning, programmes specifications, benchmark statements) be adapted to take greater account of research into student learning, and be used to shape and improve learning experiences and outcomes?

study universities. During the final year of the project, a survey of students from a wider range of subjects at nine universities was undertaken to assess the general applicability of the case study findings. The design of the main part of the study is summarised in Figure 1 above.

Methods

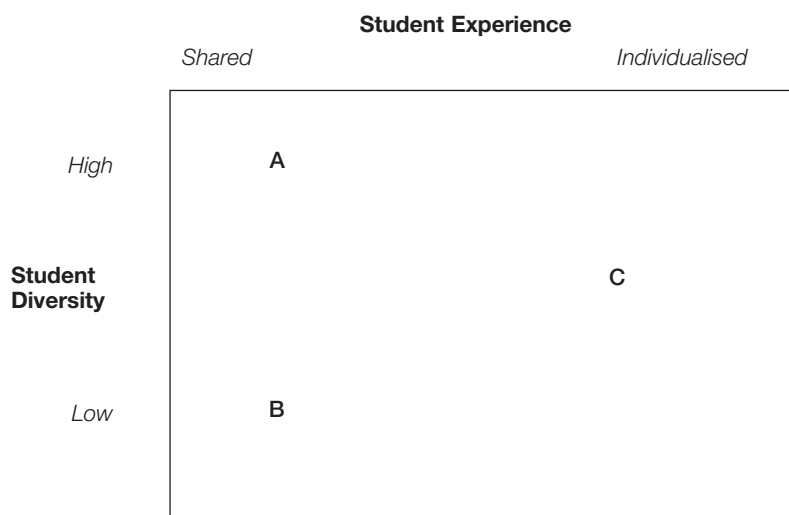
The study adopted a case study methodology and concentrated on students and graduates in three contrasting academic subjects: biosciences, business studies and sociology. This combination of subjects allowed academic/vocational and science/non-science dimensions to be explored. For each subject, five study programmes from different universities were selected to represent the different social and organisational features in which the project was interested. Students from these programmes were investigated by means of questionnaires and face-to-face interviews at various stages during and after their undergraduate careers. There was a particular focus on their conceptions of learning and personal and professional identity, and on the factors which they saw as influencing these conceptions. There were also interviews with teachers at each of the 15 case

Results

Central to the project has been an interest in the increasing diversity of higher education. The project explored the relationships between three kinds of diversity – of universities, of students, and of what students learn while at university. While there are official statements about what students are supposed to learn, and unofficial perceptions about the ‘best’ and the ‘worst’ places to learn it, there is very limited evidence about what different kinds of students learn at different kinds of university. It is this evidence gap that we have attempted to fill.

In considering how the different forms of institutional diversity combine with the different forms of student diversity to help shape the student experience, the project has developed a simple typology based on the two dimensions of the diversity of the student population, and the extent to

Figure 2: Three types of contexts for student learning



which the student experience is a shared one. These reflect the project's initial concepts of social and organisational mediation, and recombine them so that they can be applied to particular universities and courses. Figure 2 on the previous page suggests three types of contexts for student learning arising from these dimensions.

In a Type A context, a diverse group of students come together to share a largely common experience during their time at university. This provides opportunities for 'learning from difference' and might be linked to the promotion of social integration and cohesion.

In a Type B context, broadly similar kinds of students come together to share a largely common experience. This might imply the maintenance of existing differences, reinforcement of existing identities and the promotion of status confirmation and legitimisation.

In a Type C context, students have only limited contact with other students, so the diversity of the group is not particularly significant. These are the students who typically have demanding outside commitments, whether domestic or employment-related. Their time for study is limited and even more so is their time for other aspects of university life. For such students, university may be more about living with difference, and maintaining and constructing multiple identities, at university, home and work.

It is of course possible for individual students to have, say, a Type C experience in a Type B setting. When we examined the dominant experience in each of the 15 case study universities, there appeared to be three examples of Type A, eight examples of Type B and four examples of Type C.

The project has been investigating whether different things are learned (taking a wide view of learning to embrace the academic and the non-academic, the personal and the social) in these different kinds of learning context.

Summarising quite complex data, we can say that some things seem to be the same irrespective of context. Students appear to conceive change in themselves in social and personal more than academic terms. They stressed their developing personal self-confidence and ability to get on with a wide range of people.

But some things do seem to be much more associated with a particular type of student setting. For example:

- Students from Type B university settings appear to develop strong loyalties towards their universities which are not shared to the same extent by students in the other two

Major implications

The project's findings on the effects of the increasing diversity of UK higher education – both in terms of its students and its institutional forms – have implications at different levels and for different stakeholders in higher education. But common to all of them is a set of challenges to all those who uncritically accept a reputational hierarchy as being the key to the understanding of the effects and consequences of diversity. The project has identified many commonalities to the experiences and outcomes of university study, almost irrespective of where and what one studies. And where differences exist they do not automatically match reputational hierarchies.

This means that intending students need greater clarity in working out their personal objectives and preferences, and to help them seek a good match between these and what is on offer at any particular higher education institution. They should not merely seek the so-called 'best' place to which their exam results will take them.

Universities and other higher education institutions probably need more clarity about the particular kinds of student backgrounds, lifestyles and objectives that can be catered for within the institution. They should recognise that different kinds of students will need different things. This is likely to involve giving attention to

- forms of curriculum organisation, including the amount and kinds of choices available, the advice and information to be provided on these choices and the larger social, organisational and spatial implications of these choices;
- whether and how to try to target different kinds of curriculum and pedagogic offerings to different kinds of students;
- what other forms of support, formal and informal, need to be provided to meet the needs of diverse groups of students;

types. They generally emphasise the importance of the people they have met at university, their ability to get on with a wide range of people and their commitment to maintaining contact with them after university.

- Type A students share the commitments of Type B students to friends made at university but lack their loyalty to the university itself. They are the students who seem to be most committed to their subjects and their studies, in some cases evidenced by a strong commitment to postgraduate study. They are rather less likely than other students to feel that their time at university has changed the way they see the world.
- Students from Type C settings differ from other students in a number of

- ensuring that the assessment and certification of learning recognise a wide and diverse range of learning outcomes.

Employers and others concerned with the qualities of university graduates need to recognise both what undergraduate studies have in common and how they vary. They should resist the temptation to ascribe simple stratified and hierarchical notions to the rich and complex outcomes of university study.

For government and national agencies charged with the oversight of higher education in the UK, a number of potential challenges to current policies and thinking are suggested by the student voices which have emerged in the course of the project. They include the following:

- The employability and skills agenda of government may not be fully shared by students. At the very least, an exclusive focus on employability and skills may lead to a neglect of equally important ways in which higher education may change people's lives and impact upon the communities in which they live.
- Conceptions of learning outcomes as expressed in subject benchmark statements were broadly endorsed by the students who took part in the study. But they failed to tell the whole story of what is learned at university.
- The dominant hierarchical conception of diversity in UK higher education in policy discourse provides only a very limited reflection of the diversities that exist, and neglects the commonalities that can be found.
- Specifically, the student experience is a part-time one for most students. This should be recognised, as should the opportunities which this can provide for a wider range of learning outcomes, both employment-related and in personal development.

respects. They report lower gains in self-confidence and are much less likely to expect to retain university friendships after graduation. They are more likely to feel that they 'never fitted in' and very much more likely to feel that the 'qualification was the main thing.' They tend to report that life outside university remained the most important aspect of their lives. They were more likely than other students to have a clearer view of the future than when they commenced their course.

There are of course subject differences within each of these three types, and differences related to the characteristics and circumstances of individual students. The importance of these will be reported on in the project's various forthcoming publications.

Further information

The Higher Education Academy is publishing a series of working papers based on the project. These are:

What is learned at university? The social and organisational mediation of university learning, 2005, John Brennan and David Jary, York: The Higher Education Academy.

The organisational mediation of university learning, 2005, John Brennan and Mike Osborne, York: The Higher Education Academy.

The social mediation of university learning, 2006, Muir Houston and Yann Lebeau, York: The Higher Education Academy.

A cognitive developmental model of university learning, 2007, John T E Richardson and Rob Edmunds, York: The Higher Education Academy.

What is learned at university? The student voice, 2008 forthcoming, York: The Higher Education Academy.

What is learned at university? The implications, 2008 forthcoming, York: The Higher Education Academy.

Copies of the working papers can be downloaded from the project's website www.open.ac.uk/cheri.

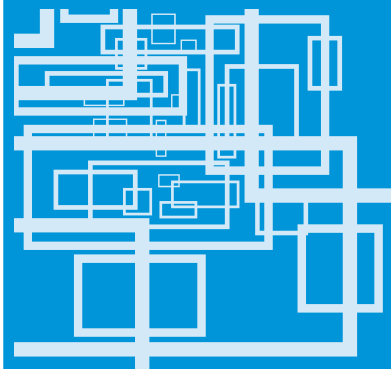
The forthcoming book to be published by Routledge-Falmer will be based on the project: Brennan J, Edmunds R, Houston M, Jary D, Lebeau Y, Osborne M and Richardson JTE, forthcoming, *Improving What is Learned at University: an exploration of the social and organisational diversity of university education*, London: Routledge-Falmer.

The warrant

The project's conclusions are based on the experiences of students and staff from 15 universities covering a range of different types of institution and drawing on different types of data. Over 1600 questionnaires were completed from students at the 15 case study universities, and over 600 questionnaires were completed as part of the wider survey of students. In addition, nearly 250 interviews were conducted with students at the case study institutions, coupled with focus groups and staff interviews.

The project was informed by and built on a significant academic literature on student learning. The experienced project team was assisted by two international advisors, from France and the United States. Regular meetings with representatives of the Higher Education Academy and its relevant subject centres occurred, as did meetings with the Quality Assurance Agency. The project was also supported by a steering group chaired by the Director of the Higher Education Policy Institute and composed of relevant experts from the research and policy communities.

Teaching and Learning Research Programme



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