

WHAT IS LEARNED AT UNIVERSITY

## SOMUL

The Social and Organisational  
Mediation of University Learning

## Working Paper 6 September 2009

### Implications for policy and practice

This is the sixth and final paper in a series of working papers published by the Higher Education Academy to disseminate information about the project entitled “What is learned at university: the social and organisational mediation of university learning” (SOMUL).

The project was part of the ESRC’s Teaching and Learning Research Programme. It commenced in 2004 and was completed in Spring 2008. The project was undertaken jointly by a research team from the Centre for Higher Education Research and Information and the Institute of Educational Technology at the Open University, and the Centre for Research in Lifelong Learning at the University of Stirling.

The SOMUL project involved fieldwork in 15 case study universities – five cases each for biosciences, business studies and sociology. Students from these programmes were investigated by means of questionnaires and face to face interviews (both at individual level and in focus groups) at various stages during and after their undergraduate careers. Interviews were also undertaken with staff. A wider survey of third year students in the existing three subjects and six other subjects (computing, electrical engineering, film and media, geography, history and mathematics) within the original institutions plus one additional institution was undertaken in the final year of the project to assess the general applicability of the case study findings.

Several papers based on the project have been published and presentations have been made at a number of conferences and seminars. A book based on the project is to be published later this year: Brennan J, Edmunds R, Houston M, Jary D, Lebeau Y, Osborne M and Richardson JTE, *What is Learned at University: An Exploration of the Social and Organisational Diversity of University Education*, forthcoming, London: Routledge-Falmer.

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## PROJECT AIM AND SUMMARY

### The aim of the project was to:

- increase our understanding of the learning outcomes from an increasingly diverse higher education system
- investigate how these are socially and organisationally mediated. Social mediation refers primarily to the effects of the social mix of students and the characteristics of the student culture and lifestyle. *Organisational mediation* refers to the principles underlying the organisation of the curriculum and to linked organisational issues concerning staff, students, time and space.

### In summary it was exploring the relationships between:

conceptions of learning outcomes:

- as cognitive development
- as academic and professional identity
- as personal identity and conception of self

ways in which learning is mediated:

- by formal educational curricula and assessment
- by the principles of institutional organisation (curriculum, staff and students, space)
- by the social context of study

### It focuses primarily on three subject fields, selected as representative of 'science', 'social science' and 'broadly vocational' courses:

- Biochemistry
- Business Studies
- Sociology

### Relevance to policy and practice is being achieved through links with:

- The Higher Education Academy and the Subject Centres for: Biosciences; Sociology, Anthropology and Politics; Business, Management, Accountancy and Finance
- The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education
- The Council for Industry and Higher Education

### Previous working papers in the series are:

*Working Paper 1 – What is learned at university?*  
May 2005, John Brennan and David Jary

*Working Paper 2 – The organisational mediation of university learning*  
December 2005, John Brennan and Mike Osborne

*Working Paper 3 – The social mediation of university learning*  
October 2006, Muir Houston and Yann Lebeau

*Working Paper 4 – A cognitive-developmental model of university learning*  
February 2007, John T E Richardson and Robert Edmunds

*Working Paper 5 – Key findings*  
August 2009, John Brennan, Mike Osborne and Tarla Shah

**For more detailed information**, including the project timetable and downloadable copies of other papers in this series, please visit:  
**[www.open.ac.uk/cheri/pages/CHERI-Projects-SOMUL.shtml](http://www.open.ac.uk/cheri/pages/CHERI-Projects-SOMUL.shtml)**

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# What is learned at university?

## The social and organisational mediation of university learning (The SOMUL project): Implications for policy and practice

by David Jary and Tarla Shah

### INTRODUCTION

Having reported a selection of our findings and some general implications of the SOMUL project in working paper 5, in this final working paper we address the implications for policy and practice in more detail. We also consider supporting research.

We would argue that our models of the organisational and social mediation of university learning (see Figure 1) and our conceptualisations of academic settings and student orientations provide useful general ‘tools for thinking’. More specific substantive pointers about learning and teaching, student orientations and the outcomes of higher education are identified in this paper.

We make suggestions and provide discussion points for academic staff and course planners, and for students. We highlight implications for teaching and learning and students’ choice of course, and for a number of current policy ‘discourses’ in contemporary higher education.

### COMMONALITIES AND DIFFERENCES IN UK HIGHER EDUCATION

Whilst the SOMUL study sought to focus on the implications of old and new diversities in an expanded higher education system (diversities of institutions, students and outcomes), we wanted to avoid any conventional account of UK higher education simply in terms of a division between ‘old/pre-92’ and ‘new/post-92’ universities. There is limited evidence about what different kinds of

students learn at different kinds of university. This is an evidence gap that the project attempted to fill.

The dominant hierarchical conception of diversity in the current UK higher education policy discourse provides only a very limited reflection of the complex pattern of commonalities and diversities that exist.

Common to all the issues we highlight for those who work or study in higher education are challenges to the notion of uncritical acceptance of an explication of the UK higher education system in terms of a reputational hierarchy. The SOMUL project identified many commonalities in the experiences and outcomes of university study, irrespective of where students study. Where differences exist they are not necessarily related to reputational hierarchies. There is also the overarching question of how far higher education outcomes associated with institutional reputation arise from real influences within institutions or in some cases simply reflect prior social and cultural capital or other inherited attributes.

Important among the differences we identified are:

- i. the variety of ways in which students engage with higher education, including an increase in home based and commuting students, and nominally full-time students undertaking part-time paid work;
- ii. three types of educational settings (see Figure 2);
- iii. differences in the experiences and outcomes associated with different subjects.

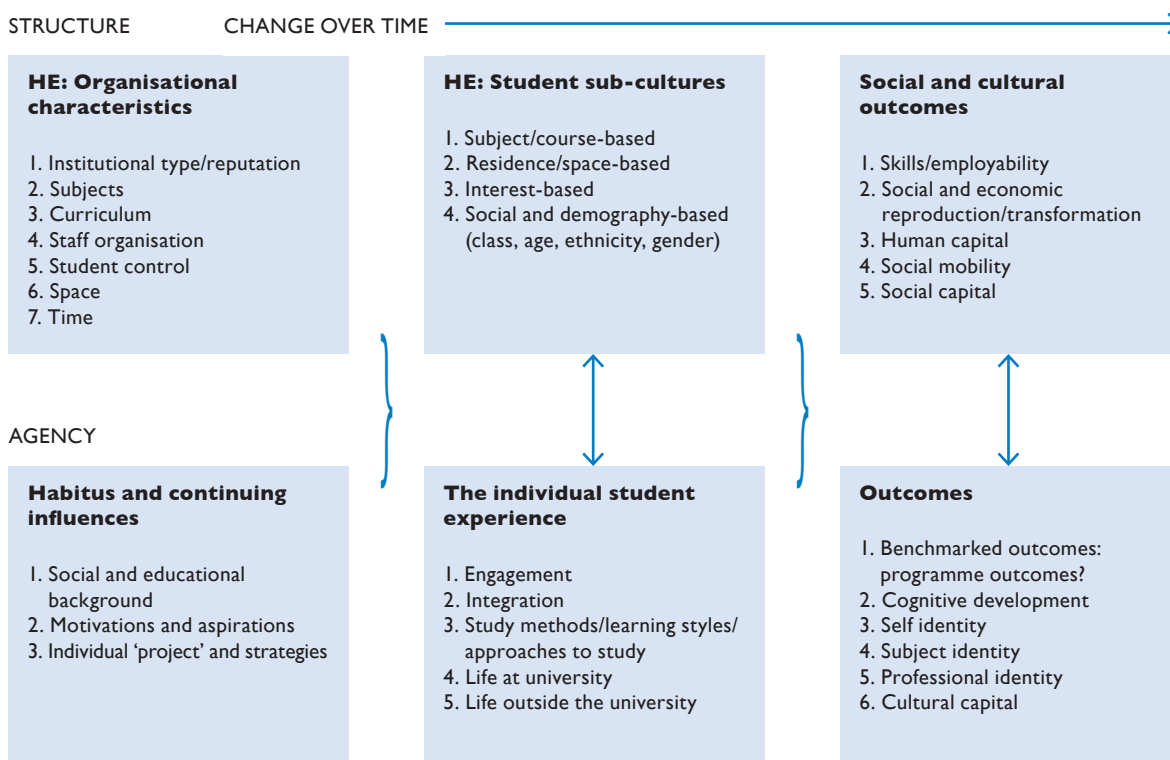
However, significant commonalities exist in relation to the above in that:

- i. despite tendencies to ‘massification’ and what has been termed ‘McDonaldisation’, what can be termed personal ‘intimate’ pedagogies are retained in all institutions;
- ii. despite an increase in home based students, there is a continuation of the ‘residential’ pattern of students moving away from home and spending part of their time in university-provided living accommodation;

- iii. the pervasive influence of subject cultures continues, maintaining similarities between courses in the same subject in different institutions.

These commonalities mean that in important respects the UK higher education system remains a unitary system, despite the existence of reputational hierarchy. These unitary features are under threat from national policies encouraging and seeking to increase diversity. There are reasons to question such a direction for policy.

Figure 1: Mediators and outcomes: structural and individual levels of analysis



*NOTE: This figure summarises our overall mapping of the main organisational and social mediations of student learning. It presents higher education in terms of a model of structure and agency, drawing on the sociological theories of Giddens (1984) and Bourdieu (1977, 1998). The upper three boxes contain predominantly structural factors, whilst the lower level boxes list more ‘agentic’ ones. An interaction of upper and lower factors is assumed in which neither structure nor agency is dominant. Movement from left to right in the figure then indicates movement through time and can involve either social and cultural reproduction or personal change and, potentially, system transformation. Another way of relating to such processes is what Wertsch (1998 cited in James and Biesta, 2007) refers to as the ‘affordances’ as well as ‘constraints’ associated with structures.*

## SOME CHALLENGES TO NATIONAL POLICY

The following challenges to current national policies can be identified, especially arising from the students' and staff 'voices'.

- The policy drivers of the UK government and the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) have been to increase the diversity of the higher education system along a continuum from research intensive to teaching only institutions. However, an increased 'polarisation' of higher education may risk curtailing the economic and wider cultural and social benefits sought from an overall expansion of higher education.
- Students largely confirm the learning outcomes claimed in the generic elements of the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education's (QAA) subject benchmark statements, but this tells us only part of the story of 'what is learned at university'. Personal rather than simply academic outcomes are also important to students.
- The employability and skills agenda of the government is not always fully shared by students. A narrow focus on employability and skills neglects the equally important ways in which higher education changes people's lives and values and the communities in which they live.
- Problems arising from the 'part-time' engagement in learning of some full-time students because they undertake term-time paid work or have domestic responsibilities should be acknowledged, but so should the opportunities which can arise from this for a wider range of learning outcomes, both employment-related and in terms of personal development.

## IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICY AND PRACTICE

In the remainder of this paper we consider some more specific implications of the SOMUL project for teachers, institutional leaders, course planners, and learning and teaching professionals,

as well as for students and other stakeholders, including the employers of graduates. Our discussion is divided into three areas:

- pedagogic issues and curriculum and organisational cultures;
- student orientations, identities and choice of course and institution;
- learning and teaching discourses.

### PEDAGOGIC ISSUES AND CURRICULUM AND ORGANISATIONAL CULTURES

The implications we suggest for pedagogy and for curriculum and organisational cultures should be seen in the light of some of the central general assumptions of the project's focus on the social and organisational mediation of learning, in the sense that learning is a function of:

- i. the social composition and life experiences (including previous and concurrent experiences) of the student body on different programmes – *social mediations*;
- ii. the organisational features of programmes and their institutional contexts – *organisational mediations*.

What this means is that experiences and outcomes of higher education are more than a matter of pedagogy in any narrow sense. It is also true to say that those contemplating possible intervention need to consider both the 'structures' (the constraints and affordances) and the agents and 'agency' likely to operate in each particular case. Our findings suggest, for example, that each of the three A, B and C learning settings (see Figure 2) should be recognised as posing different issues and demanding different responses. Nor must it be assumed that the issues and responses will be identical *within* each type of learning setting. These are quite different assumptions from those which would indicate a 'one size fits all' approach or those arising from any distinction between institutional types ('old/pre-92' and 'new/post-92').

Figure 2: Three types of contexts for student learning

	Shared	Student Experience	Individualised
High	A  C  B		
Student Diversity			
Low			

With the above caveats, the following implications for pedagogic issues and curriculum and organisational cultures can be suggested.

*i. Induction and Year 1 teaching*

The importance of effective induction and first year programmes in the retention of students is widely acknowledged by institutions. In an 'Academy Literature Review', it was reported that: 'students withdrew from the first year if they felt they were not integrated' (Harvey *et al*, 2006:5). The SOMUL data confirms the importance of the early months of study and the significance of the occurrence of problems of induction and adjustment for students in all settings.

A different issue is a 'lack of stretch' in Year 1 work reported by some students. On some courses, especially where students already possess an A-level in the subject, students felt that they were able to coast and complained of lack of stimulation.

*Institutions should establish whether the demands made by introductory courses sufficiently match the needs of students from different backgrounds.*

*ii. Teaching contact and study time*

With an increasing 'consumerism' in higher education, teaching hours have become a public issue. For students in both the first and final years of study in the three subjects investigated by the project (biosciences, business studies and sociology), biosciences courses had greater formal contact time. Students also reported

greater overall time spent studying compared with sociology and business studies students. In general, however, we found a relatively weak positive correlation between self-reported contact time and self-reported independent study hours. Students also indicated overall patterns of study that suggest a virtual 'part-time' involvement by some students and relatively low weekly average hours of study. This is consistent with other recent findings (e.g. the studies by Bekhradnia *et al*, 2006, 2007 and 2009; Brennan *et al*, 2009). How far should these patterns and levels of study be viewed as problematic? Do they indicate that too little is required of students or too little regard is given for the rights of students, as 'customers' of higher education?

*Universities can in one respect be reassured by the SOMUL data that the concerns expressed by employers and the wider public about low teaching contact hours and levels of independent study are not generally shared by students or by staff (see also a recent survey – NUS, 2008). Equally, however, differences within, as well as between, subjects (and international differences – Bekhradnia *et al*, 2009), suggest that there may be benefit from a more systematic consideration of patterns of teaching contact and independent study.*

*iii. Informal support for student learning*

Indications from some of the staff we interviewed suggest that well-planned informal support for learning can be a highly effective adjunct to formal teaching arrangements, e.g. in one sociology department a student officer and dedicated student support room at departmental level was especially appreciated by students.

*Course planners and teachers should be aware that planned informal provision to support student learning can be a vital adjunct to formal teaching arrangements.*

*iv. Subjects and subject cultures*

Subject cultures remain a significant factor in higher education provision, but they can also

be associated with a curricular conservatism. However, the SOMUL data suggests that the hegemony of subjects and the demands of students may be broadly in balance. Subjects appear to be increasingly responsive to student demands. But equally subjects have retained a measure of control over such changes. We also found, as described by the QAA's subject benchmark statements, that a range of generic as well as subject specific outcomes are being attained.

A number of specific subject related issues arise in relation to teaching and learning. In sociology, quantitative methods appear to be losing out to qualitative methods, perhaps a result of the methodological preferences of staff and the relatively low levels of mathematical competence of students. Williams et al (2008: 1003) suggest that 'the views held by present undergraduates do not auger well for a methodologically pluralist discipline ... or more generally for key numeric and analytic skills the sociology graduates can bring to other professions and occupations'. For business studies, there were specific concerns about the limitations of the treatment of ethical issues. Issues also arose from differences in the gender balance within our three subject areas. In sociology, we found female students who welcomed both the preponderance of female students and the prominence of the female voice within the present day sociology curriculum, but other students (including both male and female students) viewed this less positively.

*Universities can be commended in that the hegemony of subjects and the demands of students appear in reasonable balance and that a range of generic as well as subject specific outcomes is being achieved. But there are more specific subject issues that should be addressed.*

v. *Student assessment*

Entwistle and Hounsell (2007) regard 'the ways of thinking and practising in a subject' as offering 'a powerful means of evaluating the fundamental goals of a degree', which can include both course specific and generic outcomes. Ideally, student assessment

should also seek to evaluate such central features of courses and encourage width of study. However, in our research, strategic instrumentality – study and course attendance biased towards areas directly involved in formal assessment – was recognised by both staff and students as a widespread feature of student behaviour and a source of dilemmas in assessment. On the one hand, a surfeit of continuous assessment may accentuate a culture of strategic instrumentality and discourage more open-ended study. On the other hand, since students respond above all to the requirements of assessment, less assessment may still fail to encourage wider study. As Becker et al (1968) suggest, these issues may be perennial.

*Higher education institutions need to continuously review the dilemmas associated with student assessment and seek a balance of assessment in both courses and modules congruent with both the broader and more specific learning objectives of courses.*

vi. *Course structures and student option choice, including opportunities for part-time study*

It can be revealing to consider higher education cultures and structures as an organisation of time and space that can both help and hinder student learning. As such, with the widespread introduction of modularity and semesterisation, a potentially new flexibility of time and space, and an expansion of student option choice, might have been expected. However, this is not what is evident in our research. Sometimes narrowness of choice arises from resource constraints but our data suggests that it more often reflects student agency and a positive preference for coherent course programmes. Such a pattern of preference is in fact something that has been evident ever since the first initiatives, such as the Oxford Polytechnic Modular Scheme (Watson, 1989). There is, however, little indication that modularity has brought more flexible patterns of part-time study and student movement between institutions.

*Whilst modular provision has helped to generate a new flexibility of curriculum, higher education institutions and policy makers should ask why this has not, for the most part, resulted in more flexible patterns of part-time study or student movement between institutions.*

vii. *Residential and non-residential university experiences (including part-time work)*

The social side of university remains very important especially, but not only, in 'old' universities where student residence in university-provided living accommodation is more popular. However, with more students living at home and attending a local university, commuting is now more common, often involving the combination of university study with domestic responsibilities, part-time paid work and social lives at home. Some nominally full-time students appear, in effect, more like part-time students. Is the experience of part-time paid work always a negative factor or does it offer opportunities for personal growth? How should institutions and teachers respond? Differences in student experiences and engagement found in the three educational settings identified are, in part, associated with different patterns of residence. However, in some cases we found suggestions that the institution's provision amounts almost to the provision of 'parallel universities'. In other institutions provision has failed to respond much to changing patterns of student engagement and integration.

*Policy makers and institutions should be alert to the uncertain implications of an increase in the numbers of students who commute from home and review how far patterns of course provision and treatment of students remain appropriate.*

viii. *The relation between teaching and research and the issue of part-time teaching*

The relation between teaching and research and the status of teaching compared with research were issues that concerned many of the academic staff we interviewed. Whilst most staff, though less so in business studies, recognised the

importance of a linkage between teaching and research, and some regarded this as the essence of a university experience, the practicalities differ. Thus in some departments a prioritisation of research and increased RAE and research council funding threatens to increase the gap between teaching and research by removing research-led academics from undergraduate teaching. There is also the important issue of the general value placed on teaching compared with research in many institutions. In a recent online survey by the Higher Education Academy (2009), while 92 per cent of staff thought teaching should be an important factor in promotions, only 43 per cent think it is. Academic staff also often reported difficulties in balancing teaching, research and administration, and this is especially so in the post-92 universities, where research is less well-supported and part-time and postgraduate teachers are less available than in institutions with significant RAE research and research council funding.

The availability of a corps of postgraduate students as teachers in research-intensive departments, and the use of part-time teaching staff in all departments, raises a number of further issues. Whilst, in some departments, high-flyer researchers are allowed to contract out of undergraduate teaching, in others – including some of the most research intensive departments – it is a policy that senior staff should engage in undergraduate teaching. Also, whilst some students resent what they see as an over-reliance on part-time staff in their institutions, other students reported the closeness of postgraduate teachers to the undergraduate experience as an advantage. Finally, where part-time teachers were employed there was sometimes little evidence that their training and integration were adequate – a significant deficiency of the link, not only between teaching and research, but also with the distinctive historic mission of the university.

*Policy makers should recognise the significance placed on a link between teaching and research both by staff and students. The lesser valuation placed on teaching compared with research in many institutions is a problem. Given*

*that part-time staff play a significant role in undergraduate teaching, the integration and training of part-time staff are vital.*

ix. **Studentship**

'Studentship' is a concept proposed by James and Biesta (2007) to sum-up the responsibilities that students should have for their own and others' learning. Students as well as staff have responsibilities in achieving collective learning outcomes. The effectiveness of seminars, for example, depends on students' attendance, appropriate preparation and active participation. E-learning is another instance where increased student agency and responsibility for shared self-study activity would enhance outcomes. Our data suggests that whilst it is a growing element in students' studies, student educational use of the Internet is dwarfed by social use. Whilst we found a good deal of relatively routine use of e-learning in all three subjects, we found less indication that the pedagogic possibilities of e-learning were being widely explored. There were examples of tutor-led e-learning that were highly effective, but such provision is

time-intensive for staff and could not be readily diffused across all areas of teaching.

*Students should recognise that they share with academic staff the responsibilities in ensuring effective teaching and learning environments.*

**STUDENT ORIENTATIONS, IDENTITIES AND CHOICE OF COURSE AND INSTITUTION**

The interrelation of social and organisational structures and individual agency is again a useful model in a consideration of student orientations and identities and of the broader social and cultural outcomes of higher education. Students relate to higher education in a variety of ways. Our research indicates the importance of appreciating the variety of ways of being and becoming a student. It suggests that higher education is utilised by students to reflexively rework their personal and social identities, in what Giddens (1991) has termed 'narratives of self'. Confidence and personal development are important to most students although they are frequently attributed to the 'wider experience of university' rather

Figure. 3: SOMUL Typology of student orientations

	Engagement +	Engagement +	Engagement –	Engagement –
Project +	1 The archetypical student	2. The engaged non-traditional experience	3. One form of strategic engagement	4. Second form of strategic engagement
Project –	5 Open-minded engagement	6 Detached engagement	7. Brand seeking orientation	8. A case of anomy
	Integration +	Integration -	Integration +	Integration –

NOTES:

*1: Personal project: The presence or absence of a personal project, i.e. a perception of the usefulness and value of studying; cost/benefit evaluation of the particular programme at a particular university.*

*2: Integration (academic and non academic): Differences in student's knowledge of the subject group organisation and level of involvement in departmental and university life.*

*3: Engagement: The intellectual interest that students have in their study and their level of engagement with their subject in these terms and possibly also the importance they grant to their studies in terms of ethics and critical thinking.*

than a specific course or subject. Sociology is something of an exception here in that personal development is often linked to what is termed by staff and students as a 'sociological imagination'. Neither subject nor professional identities have pre-eminence for students.

*i. Meeting the diverse needs of students*

Alongside the three types of educational setting identified, our eight-fold typology of student orientations (see Figure 3) indicates the range of individual student orientations. We suggest that, in the main, these should be recognised as valid ways of being a higher education student. In part, different student orientations are 'imported' into the academy, reflecting different social backgrounds. They are also a function of organisational (and subject) characteristics, and are collectively 'constructed' by students on their courses and programmes. A variety of student orientations is what must be expected in a mass higher education system. And, contrary to what many staff assume, such variety was also far from absent in earlier eras of higher education (see Marris, 1964).

The role especially of newer institutions in meeting the particular needs of so called 'non-traditional' as well as 'traditional' students should be acknowledged. However, the claim that a more earmarked curriculum content will always benefit such students remains undemonstrated. Our student typology suggests that a diversity of student needs can potentially be accommodated within mainstream provision. There is evidence that many 'non-traditional' students cope well within a 'traditional' higher education setting (Baker and Brown, 2007). Whilst the SOMUL research shows that there can be problems of integration and adjustment for such students, they mostly do appear to cope. In fact there would appear to be some advantage in avoiding an undue separation of 'traditional' and 'non-traditional' students, especially when such divisions involve differences in institutional prestige. Bowl et al (2008) argue that student types transcend 'traditional stereotypes'. And Hockings et al (2008:1) suggest 'the dominant

notion of traditional and non-traditional students creates over-simplistic understandings which limit the development of inclusive, engaging teaching'.

*As suggested by Crozier et al (2008) higher education institutions 'need to be mindful of the diversity of needs, cultures and ways of being amongst their students, maintain high expectations of their students, and enable them to maximise as broadening an experience as possible'. Contrary to some suggestions, our research suggests that a diversity of students can often be satisfactorily accommodated within mainstream provision.*

*ii. Student instrumentalism*

Academic staff quite often voice concern over what is seen as a growing student 'instrumentalism'. However, whilst some students are 'instrumental' in orientation, they mostly reject the notion that higher education is solely about gaining a qualification and are broadly satisfied by what their courses provide.

*Higher education institutions should recognise the variety of viable ways in which students utilise higher education – including instrumentalism – and that a majority of students register satisfaction with their courses, regard their courses as measuring up to the claims of subject benchmarks, and see their time at university as bolstering their personal identities.*

*iii. Student choice of course and institution*

Where a student studies can have more significance than what is studied. Given major differences in the perceived status of provision of higher education, student 'choice' of institution can impact crucially on individual educational outcomes and 'life chances'. But students do not always select the highest ranking institution consistent with their qualifications. As Reay et al (2001: 860) suggest: 'individuals applying for higher education courses are making very different kinds of choices within very different circumstances and constraints'. For some non-traditional students the local

university may seem the only economically and psychologically plausible option. A central dilemma facing non-traditional students especially is balancing a psychologically, socially, culturally and economically 'comfortable', perhaps less expensive, choice of course and institution against the possibility of a more culturally challenging, potentially more economically rewarding but perhaps also more expensive, more risky choice. The dilemmas associated with the choice of course and institution are substantial, with many students often lacking the social networks to be adequately informed of the implications of study at different types of institution. Archer and Hutchins (2000) suggest that some students on making a rough risk analysis simply decide not to go to university.

*Students and institutions need to be aware of the significant dilemmas associated with choice of course and institution. The suggestion sometimes is that students are guided by friends and hearsay and may not always make adequately informed choices. But equally, given the complexities of the costs and benefits involved, there is also an argument that says that students may sometimes be best left to make their own choices.*

- iv. *Institutional hierarchy, 'fair access', and social and economic reproduction and transformation more generally*

Crozier et al (2008) point to the differences that exist between student experiences in different institutions. Given the advantages for 'employability' – factors such as cultural capital and 'screening' – and more general social advantages associated with higher status/reputation institutions and subjects, the promotion of fair access to elite institutions for 'non-traditional students' is important. However, we also concur with Crozier et al (2008) that, in promoting increasing institutional diversity, current government and HEFCE policy should also attempt to limit collateral 'damage' potentially arising from a further 'polarisation of institutions'. Higher education is about 'positionality' in that a small number of elite

institutions convey prestige and advantage to students who attend them. But higher education is also about positionality in a wider sense in that all institutions offer personal benefits and advantages in employability compared with non-attendance at university. And, although higher education can be viewed as the 'social reproduction' of a status system, it also offers the potential for a cultural shift and structural reshaping of this system: i) via the circulation of individuals and increasing outside entry into elite sectors, and ii) from an overall expansion of higher educational opportunity bringing a structural reshaping via an increased number of higher and middle ranking positions.

*The commonalities we identified in the UK higher education system mean that it remains in an important respect a unitary system, despite its reputational hierarchy. Whilst rightly focusing on 'fair access' to elite institutions, policy makers and commentators, and all in higher education, also need to be alert to the potentially negative effects of an increasing reputational range among institutions. We should avoid assuming that higher education is only a system of social reproduction, downplaying its potential for individual and social transformation.*

## LEARNING AND TEACHING DISCOURSES

The increasing embeddedness, both socially and economically, of UK higher education has provoked a more public and mass media-led discourse about learning and teaching alongside those inside higher education. That students are now more likely to see themselves as 'customers' has also altered the content of higher education discourse. Whilst the 'news values' of the media have led to a distorted emphasis on many issues, it is equally the case that many staff viewpoints appear sometimes only weakly grounded in evidence.

Although hotly contested, it is in this general context that 'managerialism' and a 'new accountability', together with cultures of 'enhancement', have arisen in higher education. A

baleful influence to many, they have nonetheless been seen by others as helping to bring about a necessary modernisation of earlier oligarchic control that has increased the responsiveness of higher education to economic and social needs. Policy makers, institutional leaders and teachers have to learn to tread carefully in the face of the claims and counter-claims concerning the legitimacy and limitations of the 'new accountability' and higher education's new managerialism, seeking to preserve a balance between professional, managerial and democratic control.

i. *Learning and teaching discourses and regimes of accountability and enhancement*

Our interviews confirmed what is apparent from other studies that academic staff are ambivalent and divided on procedures for accountability and the value of formalised programmes for the enhancement of learning and teaching and also on widening participation. The more dialogical, less adversarial regimes of accountability and enhancement recently introduced by the QAA are welcomed by staff and are likely to be more widely supported. The role of the Higher Education Academy with its main focus on subject centres is accepted as a 'best approach' by those staff attuned to programmes of enhancement. However, the SOMUL research found staff to be divided between teaching and learning and student-oriented academic staff – often also younger staff – generally receptive to new learning and teaching discourses, and those – often older staff – who are less or largely non-receptive.

*Interventions aimed at bridging what is often a generation gap between teachers and students and older and younger teachers should be a central part of policies of accountability and enhancement.*

ii. *Subject benchmarks*

Subject benchmarks were introduced by the QAA to inform students and employers about the expected outcomes of university learning in individual subjects. They are also intended to provide a baseline in course design and course

review. As a part of the QAA's validation and review apparatus, subject benchmarks remain controversial, but their value in course design and course review was recognised by some staff. A composite of benchmark statements was used in the SOMUL research and students saw their courses as largely delivering subject benchmark outcomes.

*In the SOMUL study, subject benchmarks were seen, by those staff who had employed them, as playing a useful role in course design and course review. The study also suggests that students and wider external 'stakeholders' can have confidence in subject benchmarks as an overall guide to the content and outcomes of study.*

iii. *Competence and generic skills*

'Competence' is a key term in the development of National Vocational Qualifications. In 1984, the funding agencies for higher education issued a joint document asserting that: 'The abilities most valued in industrial, commercial and professional life as well as in public and social administration are the transferable intellectual and social skills' (NAB/UGC, 1984: 4). The Association of Graduate Recruiters (AGR) has also contributed to the debate, emphasising the need for graduates to be 'self-reliant, aware of the changing world of work, take responsibility for his or her own career and personal development and is able to manage the relationship with work and with learning throughout all stages of life' (AGR, 1995: 4). Holmes (1994: 6), however, has argued that an emphasis on competences risks undermining 'those very traditions valued in academia, espousing disinterested pursuit of knowledge, its production and dissemination, for its own sake'. Arguably, however, academia has always been concerned with 'practical' affairs of society and with vocational relevance (e.g. Silver and Brennan, 1988). The SOMUL research suggests complementarity, rather than tension, between academic goals and transferable competences. In sociology, for example, students' aspirations and perceptions of outcomes and change include such central disciplinary objectives as 'critical thinking' and the 'sociological

imagination' as well as what Albrow (1986) refers to as 'humane transferability'.

*Higher education institutions should more fully recognise the cultivation of generic skills inherent in subject provision.*

iv. *Capability and employability*

Whilst many graduates report satisfactory employment outcomes and may go on to employment related postgraduate study, graduates in the SOMUL surveys also report anxieties and difficulties in obtaining what they see as appropriate employment. Higher education discourses on 'capability and employability' sometimes appear to take relatively little account of the actual practices of graduate employers. Criticising such discourses, Brown et al (2003) refer to the importance of recognising what they term the 'duality of employability'. Whilst 'absolute employability' relates to the question 'Have students gained appropriate skills, knowledge and commitment to undertake the job in question?', 'relative employability' refers to the relative chances of a graduate acquiring and maintaining particular kinds of employment taking into account the supply and demand for posts and employers' criteria. This being so, and contrary to the claims of proponents of the 'capability curriculum', rather than always helping graduates to gain employment, innovations such as profiles of personal competence, especially where associated with lower status institutions, may only serve to increase the stigmatization of the graduates concerned as 'less capable' than those in possession of more established forms of 'cultural capital'.

*In promoting a 'capability' agenda, institutional leaders and course planners should be more cautious in their claims regarding employability.*

v. *The utility of models and measurement of orientations to learning and teaching*

Reviewing the literature on learning styles, Coffield et al (2004) suggest that the popularity and usage of learning styles questionnaires

far outstrips the evaluative base. We see the SOMUL project's data (see Working Paper 4) as illustrating both the utility and the limitations of such standardised measures of learning styles, and deep and surface learning i.e. that these measures are contextual – sometimes strategic – features of student orientations to learning.

*Teachers and learning and teaching professionals should note the utility and the limitations of standardised measures of learning styles, and deep and surface learning.*

## CONCLUSIONS

The implications of SOMUL and related research suggested in this working paper must remain tentative. As for sociological and psychological research generally, it is characteristic of higher education research that its conclusions can rarely be seen as definitive. An 'evidence base' in what is, after all, a field of social science research can never be a matter of simple formula. The SOMUL research is no exception, particularly so as higher education is a far from easy research terrain. In an era of audit and evaluation, higher education tends to regard itself as over-assessed and over-evaluated and individual departments and institutions can be suspicious of the implications of research findings. This said our academic staff respondents were mainly enthusiastic participants, although student volunteers for interview and for participation in focus groups proved more difficult to obtain, and questionnaire response rates were variable between subjects. The complexity of the interplay of structures and agency in the processes and outcomes of higher education processes is reflected in our findings.

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