Occupy the common ground
Similarities in learning outcomes in an era of diversity

Project: What is learned at university? The social and organisational mediation of university learning
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Background

Variety is now a way of life in the UK’s higher education system. Universities, their students and their learning have all become increasingly diverse. While there are official statements about what students are supposed to learn and unofficial perceptions about the ‘best’ and ‘worst’ places in which to do so, there is little evidence about what different kinds of students actually do learn in different kinds of university.

In order to broaden understanding of ‘what is learned’ in this diverse system, the project studied the experiences of students and staff at 15 universities. It considered students’ cognitive, academic and professional development as well as their personal identities. It also investigated the nature and pattern of students’ studies, both individually and collectively, and their social and educational backgrounds. And it considered the influence of universities’ structure, culture and curriculum organisation, including modularity and extended student choice.

Findings

Although students now learn in many different contexts, many of the learning outcomes are similar.

Students differ in their priorities and in their engagement with their studies, with university life and with life outside university.

Students often appear to consider personal and social change more important than the academic.

Some universities cope with increased diversity by effectively running ‘parallel’ institutions for different types of student.

Implications

Universities ‘good’ or ‘bad’ reputations may not always correspond to differences in what students learn.

Universities need to understand and take into account the range of students and types of engagement.

Policies that prioritise knowledge, skills and employability may not be in tune with students’ priorities.

Diversity requires universities to satisfy students’ very different needs.

Don’t judge by reputation

Higher education is hierarchical, with universities ranked by reputation. The project’s findings throw down a challenge for all those who uncritically accept this as a consequence of increased diversity, both of types of student and types of university. The research revealed many common experiences and outcomes of undergraduates’ studies almost irrespective of where or what they studied. And where differences did exist, better outcomes did not automatically occur in the universities with better reputations.

These findings have implications for many stakeholders in higher education at many levels. For would-be students, they suggest the need to be crystal clear about their personal objectives and preferences in order to ensure they apply to a university that can meet their needs. They should beware of simply selecting the ‘best’ place their exam results will secure them. Similarly, universities and other HE institutions need to be clearer about the types of student they can cater for – in terms of background, lifestyle and aims. They must recognise that different types of students need different things.

What universities should do

In order to cater for different student types, universities need to consider:

- How they organise their curriculum, including the amount and kinds of choice available, the information provided on these choices and the implications of these choices in terms of space, organisation and social impact.
- Whether and how to try to match the different types of curriculum and pedagogy with the different types of student.
- What support, both formal and informal, is required to meet the diverse needs of all students.
- How to ensure that qualification and assessment methods recognise a wide range of learning outcomes.

Universities should also be aware that:

- Their conceptions of learning outcomes in each subject fail to tell the whole story of what students actually learn.
- For most students, university is a part-time experience and there are many other opportunities for learning, for example, through employment, and for personal development.

Students A, B and C

The project investigated how experience was shaped by the combination of type of university with type of person. In order to do so it mapped two aspects of student diversity against an aspect of university experience – the extent to which it was individual or shared (see box).

Type A students came from diverse backgrounds, but shared a largely common experience of university. Type B students came from similar backgrounds and shared similar experiences, while type C students simply did not have much contact with other undergraduates, making their backgrounds almost irrelevant.

All three types appeared to conceive of change more in personal and social terms than in academic terms. And all three stressed their developing self-confidence and ability to get on with a wide range of people. However, type B students – the dominant type – were the most loyal to their university and emphasised the importance of meeting and getting on with people. Type A students were equally committed to friends made at university and very committed to their studies, but less so to the institution itself. Type C students tended to be those with work or family responsibilities. For them the qualification was the ‘main thing’. They gained far less in self confidence and were most likely to feel they ‘never fitted in’.

Students should not simply select the ‘best’ place their exam results will secure them

Three types of contexts for student learning

More than a job

- Employees, like students, should look beyond a university’s reputation and understand the rich and complex outcomes of undergraduate study.
- Policy-makers need to appreciate that focusing merely on employability and skills neglects equally important ways in which higher education can change people’s lives.

The research

Fifteen universities and three contrasting subjects – bioscience, business studies and sociology – were selected. For each one five programmes of study were picked to provide a range of social and organisational features. Students at the 15 universities completed a total of 1,400 questionnaires and took part in 250 interviews. Focus groups and staff interviews were also conducted, as was a survey of students from outside the 15 universities.

More information from: www.open.ac.uk/cheri