



An ESRC TLRP funded project being undertaken by the Centre for Higher Education Research and Information of the Open University and the Centre for Research in Lifelong Learning of the University of Stirling

Sociology: An Overview of Undergraduate Studies in the UK

**Prepared by Robert Jones
with David Jary and Anthony Rosie**

October 2004



ISBN 0 7442 1541 0
© The Open University

Contents

| | |
|--|----|
| Foreword | 4 |
| Introduction | 5 |
| Section 1: The Size and Shape of Sociology | 6 |
| Section 2: What Is Sociology? | 8 |
| (a) General nature of the subject matter..... | 8 |
| (b) Subject skills and transferable skills..... | 9 |
| (c) Historical and current patterns of subject matter..... | 9 |
| Section 3: Student Origins and Destination | 12 |
| (a) Intakes and patterns of participation | 12 |
| (b) Destinations..... | 14 |
| Section 4: Patterns of Learning and Teaching and Assessment | 16 |
| (a) Course structures | 16 |
| (b) Teaching and learning and assessment | 16 |
| (c) Staff development and the relationship between research and teaching | 17 |
| Section 5: 'Quality' and 'Standards' | 18 |
| Section 6: General Higher Education Context | 19 |
| References..... | 21 |
| Further Resources | 23 |
| Appendix | 24 |

Foreword

This is one of three subject overview reports that have been prepared as part of the SOMUL project (the full title of the project is *What is learned at university? The social and organisational mediation of university learning (SOMUL)*). The project is part of the Teaching and Learning Research Programme (TLRP) funded by the Economic and Social Research Council. SOMUL is being undertaken 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 aim of the project is to increase our understanding of the learning outcomes from an increasingly diverse higher education system and to investigate how these are socially and organisationally mediated.

The present phase of the project is focusing on student learning in three subjects: biochemistry, business studies and sociology. Students studying in five different university settings in each of these subjects are being asked about their experiences and their perceptions of learning over a two year period. As part of the context setting for the study, overview papers have been prepared for each of the three subjects. The purposes of the overviews are two-fold: (i) to sensitise the research team to subject cultures and issues relevant to designing and conducting the fieldwork; (ii) to provide a basis for eventual comparison of empirical findings on the three subjects and the assessment of their applicability to other subjects. Later in the project, we shall be investigating student learning in a further five subjects.

We are grateful to the authors for preparing these reports and to the support provided by the three relevant subject centres of the Higher Education Academy. All three reports and further information about the SOMUL project are available on the project website at www.open.ac.uk/cheri/SOMULhome.htm.

John Brennan
Project Director
August 2005

Introduction

The following overview document provides information on a range of issues relating to undergraduate study in sociology. It is divided into six main sections. The first section gives a broad indication of the size and 'shape' of the subject. Section 2 provides answers to the question: 'What is Sociology?' outlining the general nature of its methods and subject matter, and includes reference to the Subject Benchmark Statements for sociology. Section 3 outlines key data on student intakes to sociology, detailing overall student numbers and the breakdown of these by socio-economic group, age, gender and ethnicity. It also includes data of student destinations, on the employment patterns of sociology graduates and postgraduate study. Section 4 considers course structures and patterns of teaching and learning and assessment, while Section 5 provides a further comment on Sociology Benchmark Statements with particular reference to thresholds and standards. The overview is concluded, in Section 6, with a brief commentary on the impact of the national context of higher education on the subject in general terms and on learning and teaching in particular. A list of references is included and also references to further documents and sites available on the web, including an annotated bibliography of indicative articles on learning and teaching in sociology.

The report has been prepared to inform the project on the Social and Organisational Mediation of University Learning (SOMUL) funded by the Teaching and Learning Research programme (TLRP) of the ESRC. A summary of the project is attached as an Appendix.

Section 1: The Size and Shape of Sociology

Overall, there are around 2,110 courses containing sociology offered by a total of 125 institutions. 2085 of these are full-time, and 115 are part-time only. To this can be added 40 courses that have a sandwich format. Currently 146 courses are listed as offering sociology as a single subject, across 78 universities. This compares with an estimate given in the Quality Assurance Agency's (QAA) Subject Overview Report for Sociology of 20,000 students in England and Northern Ireland taking sociology as a major component of their degree programme. This report covered 76 institutions. 43.5% were former UFC institutions and 56.5% former PCFC institutions. The size of the sociology provision varied from three to 33 members of staff, with an average of 13.

With regard to the range of course types in sociology it is important to note that although the subject encompasses a wide spectrum of topics, themes, debates, and research areas it is only with difficulty that one can elaborate upon differences in substantive course content. In short, there is little in the way of discrete styles or types of sociology course. It is not, for example, possible to indicate a cluster of undergraduate courses which concentrate on – say – quantitative approaches to the subject. This will become more evident as the subject's Benchmark Statements are examined (in Section 2), but for now it is sufficient to note that sociology courses are, in the round, committed to introducing undergraduates to a broad range of theoretical, methodological and substantive or applied knowledge-bases related to the study of 'society' and the 'social'. The delineation of a typology of sociology courses is impractical, and would probably only serve to obscure the general picture.

The numbers of students studying the subject, together with breakdowns of study by course type (part-time or full-time), course level (undergraduate or postgraduate) and home domiciled or overseas involvement are given in Tables 1.1 and 1.2, which draw on data from the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA), produced in 2001. Table 1.1 shows the total number of people studying sociology as a single honours or main subject, at both undergraduate and postgraduate levels.

Table 1.1: Sociology students in UK HE (level and mode of study) 2001/02

| Level and mode of study | Full-time | Full-time (%) | Part-time | Part-time (%) | Total |
|--------------------------------|------------------|----------------------|------------------|----------------------|--------------|
| Undergraduate | 18,035 | 76.9 | 5,405 | 23.1 | 23,440 |
| Postgraduate | 1,835 | 37.4 | 3,075 | 62.6 | 4,910 |
| Total | 19,870 | 70.1 | 8,480 | 29.9 | 28,350 |

Based on HESA data 2001

Turning to Table 1.2, it can be seen that over three-quarters of sociology undergraduates study full-time (the proportion is inverted at postgraduate level, where the majority (two-thirds) of students are part-time). Here HESA's figures permit some level of longitudinal comparison and, by viewing Table 1.1, it is evident that the total number of students taking the subject (including both undergraduate and postgraduate students) has increased by 30% over the four years from 1997. According to HESA data the overall expansion in participation in HE over this period was 22.3% (total numbers increasing from 1,797,081 to 2,198,610). Thus, sociology has experienced an above-average rate of growth (approximately eight percentage-points higher than the overall expansion).

Table 1.2: Sociology students in UK HE (level and mode of study) 1996/97

| Level and mode of study | Full-time | Full-time (%) | Part-time | Part-time (%) | Total |
|-------------------------|-----------|---------------|-----------|---------------|--------|
| Undergraduate | 15,004 | 84.0 | 2,848 | 16.0 | 17,852 |
| Postgraduate | 1,399 | 35.5 | 2,547 | 65.5 | 3,946 |
| Total | 16,403 | 75.2 | 5,395 | 24.7 | 21,798 |

Based on HESA data 1997

A Caveat The above picture is complicated by the fact that, as well as taught under the label 'Sociology', the subject is also taught in many multi-disciplinary and anti-disciplinary contexts and under many different labels. Also sociology is often only opted for as a main subject in Year 2 or 3 of courses – as commonplace in Scotland. Locating and circumscribing 'sociology' within institutions statistically is rarely a simple matter.

Section 2: What Is Sociology?

(a) General nature of the subject matter

The preceding section reveals little of the course content or the aims and objectives of sociology degree programmes. This can be approached initially by reviewing the subject's Benchmark Statements, especially the 'defining principles.' First, it should be noted that sociology has traditionally encompassed a variety of theoretical and methodological approaches, and these have often competed for prominence in the field. Thus, in relation to theory, at the 'macro' level a long running division can be seen to have existed between functionalist and critical, often Marxist, positions. The former conceives of society fundamentally as a concordant whole, and often employs organic metaphors, viewing society and its central 'social institutions' (education, marriage, religion, etc.) as functionally necessary. By contrast, the latter views society as conflictual (e.g. the outcome of antagonistic class relations).

This picture is further complicated by the existence of a third set of perspectives holding that 'macro' level theories sometimes elide a crucial facet of the social, namely that of interaction and the capacities of individuals to interpret and act autonomously. These often 'micro' approaches (including symbolic interactionism, social phenomenology and ethnomethodology) often involve quite separate methods and levels of analysis from those at the 'macro' level. Thus, if the macro approaches are more likely to assert the value of statistical, large-scale quantitative inquiry (whether to demonstrate the ubiquity or variety of the nuclear family, or disparities in wealth, etc.), interpretative, 'micro-level' perspectives tend to eschew such methods and emphasise the need to examine the ways in which individuals 'interact' with each other and how social actors 'interpret' and in part 'construct' their social context. Such approaches are seen to require 'qualitative' (as distinct from 'quantitative') techniques, usually giving priority to direct observation of social situations and immersion in fieldwork.

While there are resolutions of such divisions of approach within the discipline (e.g. sociological analysis as involving a 'duality' of structure and agency) often the divisions continue to be couched in terms of fundamental differences in ontology and epistemology, including differences of view on the 'scientific' status of the subject. As the Sociology Benchmark Statements make clear, a student in sociology is expected to gain an understanding of the diversity of theories and methods in the subject. But it is also seen as crucial that sociology is an 'evidence-based' discipline and that students engage in 'the evidenced reassessment of everyday understandings'. As well as developing general knowledge and awareness of society and the social dimension, sociology students should also be able to use the relevant concepts to analyse past and present societies comparatively.

The Benchmark Statements emphasise that sociology is 'a reflexive discipline', including reflection on the nature of knowledge and also self-reflection as a member of the social world. A further aspect of sociological inquiry emphasised is its broadly 'critical' element. This has been perhaps most evident in perspectives such as Marxism, but is also visible in, say, Symbolic Interactionism or numerous 'applied' sociologies and in more contemporary theoretical developments such as post-structuralism. Critical sociological inquiry should enable students to evaluate the role of institutions in society and to identify and reflect upon their own assumptions and those of dominant others. Critical inquiry should also encompass the acquisition of skills which will enable competing sociological theories to be assessed, both in terms of their logical coherence and also in light of empirical evidence – whether this is of a quantitative or qualitative nature. To this extent, the subject encourages scepticism in its students, whilst simultaneously positing the need to recognise a firmly grounded and conceptually well-developed theoretical framework. As brought out especially in section 2 of the Sociology Benchmark Statements ('nature and extent of the subject') and section 3 ('subject knowledge and understanding'), sociology students have a number of ways in which

to position themselves in relation to their chosen field of study. The subject can be said to see itself as both scientific and humanistic.

A wider debate on the social sciences should also be noted (e.g. as encapsulated in the report of the Gulbenkian Commission on the Restructuring of the Social Sciences – Wallerstein et al., 1996). The division of the social sciences into disciplines is historically constructed and remains contested. Different viewpoints in this respect and different patterns of disciplinary relations – including multi-disciplinarity - affect the content and focus of the 'sociology' curriculum in different institutions.

(b) Subject skills and transferable skills

It is also apparent (from section 4 of the Benchmark Statements, which addresses both 'subject skills and other skills') that sociology students should develop both general and discipline specific cognitive skills, including the ability to locate and acquire information pertinent to a given task, together with the accumulation and retention of the most salient aspects of this information and the ability to work independently and to work cooperatively in groups. Regarding more subject-particular proficiencies, sociology students can be expected to be able to apply a range of theoretical perspectives, whilst also gaining an appreciation of the relevance and applicability of a given perspective for a prescribed field of inquiry. A greater attention to generic transferable skills in course outcomes and assessment is evident from programme specifications. Nor is this something that arises simply as a response to the requirements of quality processes. So much is seen from Albrow's (1986) Presidential Address in which he makes the case that sociology can provide the core for a humane education, but also that 'we need to fulfil the educational promise of the discipline by reviewing the first degree curriculum to ensure that it does promote the skills and capacities of which it is such an inherently suitable bearer'. Placements within sociology courses remain relatively exceptional although there is a minority of courses (e.g. in sociological research) that include placements and require 4 years of study and there is a growing interest in expanding placement opportunities (e.g. see the FDTL (Fund for the Development of Teaching and Learning) Sociologists in Placements project – FDTL, 1999). There is also considerable interest in developments such as student volunteering as an element in courses (Hall and Hall, 2004). A greater attention to practical and work related skills within sociology might be seen as evidence of a shift from Mode 1 to Mode 2 knowledge and 'performativity' (Gibbons, et al, 1994) but in sociology 'performativity' might be argued to be a feature of both subject related and generic skills.

(c) Historical and current patterns of subject matter

In this sub-section we provide an historical and contemporary overview of shifts in course content evident in sociology provision. The primary root of UK undergraduate sociology was the London School of Economics and the University of London, via its external degree provision in university colleges and in advanced further education. The London variant of sociology also predominated when external London provision was replaced in the new polytechnics by the Council for National Academic Awards (CNAA). Distinctive variations existed elsewhere – e.g. in Manchester and Liverpool - emphasising ethnography and industrial sociology. London sociology and much of initial CNAA provision in the new polytechnics involved a relatively standard pattern with courses on:

- Sociological Theory (classical and contemporary theory)
- Research Methods (usually social surveys and basic statistics)
- Social Philosophy/Philosophy of Science and Social Science
- Modern British Society
- Comparative Social Institutions
- Selection of sociological options, including well established options such as industrial and organisational sociology, political sociology, social stratification, sociology of education, sociology of religion
- Selection of options from range of auxiliary social sciences, e.g. economics, politics

- A dissertation was possible, but not the near ubiquitous feature of sociology courses that it has since become.

A combination of epistemological and institutional events broke the mould. The creation of new universities at the time of the Robbins Report and the seismic shifts in epistemological and theoretical thinking that impacted on the predominant British 'empiricism' with which until then UK sociology was associated. Among the latter can be mentioned: 'post empiricist' conceptions of science, feminism, and the emergence of post-modernism and (a closely related development) post-structuralism. Although these strands of thought have roots in continental philosophical critical thinking (such as the work of Foucault and Derrida) and remain contested, they have proved popular amongst many British academics. These shifts popularise hitherto comparatively neglected fields of research including sexuality, 'discourse' (which has given rise to certain far-reaching methodological debates) and 'governmentality'. Thus current prospectuses in sociology reveal a rich diversity of topics and themes, incorporating both the strengths of the earlier sociological tradition and the most relevant aspects of the new directions. To some this represents a fragmentation of the discipline; to others a rich flowering and escape from previous constraints.

The flexibility or fragmentation of the sociology curriculum has also come about as the result of organisational change, especially modularisation and semesterisation, and what can be termed the 'democratisation' (and external and internal 'marketisation') of learning and teaching, via student influence over the curriculum and increased choice between and within awards/courses. Some commentators detect a movement from progression to simple credit accumulation as a feature of sociology provision. Thus, it is a feature of provision that students can often choose to focus on 'softer' (qualitative) rather than 'hard' (quantitative) methods or to focus on a relatively narrow range of sociology options, say, on gender and sexuality, or crime and deviance. Somewhat paradoxically, the modern student of sociology following a modular course may end-up more specialised than even the earlier single honours graduate. On the other hand, opportunities to pick-and-mix in joint honours, major-minor and other combinations have also multiplied, although the QAA Subject Overview Report for Sociology commented: 'Modular schemes are intended to increase student choice' but there was 'some evidence that such opportunities are theoretically possible, but not always practised'. A further feature of the new context is that there is also now a strong trend for sociology to spawn new programmes that no longer bear the title sociology, notably recently in crime and society/crime and deviance, etc. For the most part these developments are a response to student demand and are market driven, being introduced especially in so-called 'recruiting' rather than 'selecting' departments where the demand for traditional or mainstream sociology is in decline, largely as a consequence of 'older' institutions recruiting increasing numbers of sociology students (see also section 4). In this sense, contrary to what was earlier stated, it is now becoming possible to identify particular types of sociology course. But whether these should be regarded as 'sociology' courses is also an issue.

Whatever the type of course label or course structure (see also section 5) however, it is clear that, compared with earlier patterns, there have been major shifts in the focus of the sociology degree. Sociological theory is no longer merely or mainly 'classical' theory and may lose its status as a subject in its own right (especially as 'theory' taught straight is likely to be seen as 'difficult'). A separate 'social philosophy' course is rare. Research methods are more likely to be qualitative, with quantitative approaches reduced to optional status. Separate comparative courses are less mandatory. The compulsory 'core' in current sociology courses is more likely to teach sociological theory in situ as it were within more substantive courses. However, in general the 'core' is reduced, and optionality expanded. The range of options is markedly different, with the recurring popular choices including:

- Crime and society/Crime and deviance
- Gender/Sexuality
- Self/Identity/Lifecourse/Autobiography

- Media/Mass Culture
- Body/emotions
- Health and illness
- Social divisions/inequalities
- Race/Ethnicity

Courses on Europe or Globalisation (the latter sometimes replacing Social Change/Social Development) are a newer feature but do not rival the above list. Reflecting 'a cultural turn' within the discipline, previously powerful option areas with a strong structural emphasis in relative decline include:

- Social stratification
- Industrial Sociology/Organisational sociology
- Sociology of education
- Sociology of religion
- Comparative/Historical sociology

Finally, the dissertation is now a near universal feature of courses, usually as a core requirement within single honours programmes, with strong claims made for its significance in the development of student awareness and skills – a view supported by the QAA Subject Overview Report for Sociology.

Section 3: Student Origins and Destination

The following identifies key aspects of levels and types of involvement in sociology, and provides details of participation rates by gender, class, ethnicity and age. Raw data from HESA and the Universities and Colleges Admissions Service (UCAS) have been processed to create the relevant tables. Information relating to graduate destinations is also provided.

(a) Intakes and patterns of participation

Possibly one of the most noteworthy aspects of participatory patterns in the subject is the 'disproportionate' number of female students in all categories, women being more than twice as likely to take sociology as men (see Table 3.1). Unfortunately it is not possible to present any longitudinal data on this gender difference as HESA's information only begins to incorporate these figures in 2000/2001. However, sociology has increasingly displayed this form of gender imbalance, even if precise details are unavailable. It is perhaps also worth noting that this gender imbalance is not peculiar to the United Kingdom. It is also characteristic of arts and humanities courses more generally.

Table 3.1: Sociology students in UK HE (type and gender of student) 2001/02

| Category of student | Male | Male (%) | Female | Female (%) | Total |
|----------------------------|-------------|-----------------|---------------|-------------------|--------------|
| Domiciled UK | 7,520 | 28.3 | 19,030 | 71.7 | 26,550 |
| EU students | 265 | 35.0 | 490 | 65.0 | 755 |
| Overseas students | 400 | 38.2 | 645 | 62.8 | 1,045 |
| Total | 8,185 | 28.9 | 20,165 | 71.1 | 28,350 |

Based on HESA data 2001

In viewing classed elements of participation in the subject it is necessary to enter further caveat. The data in Table 3.2 (consisting of UCAS statistics) does not contain figures which relate exclusively to sociology. Rather, all information links to a wider subject area, namely all those who accepted places onto full-time undergraduate social studies and combined social science degree programmes (this totals approximately 120 courses listed under the Joint Academic Coding System – JACS, as used by both HESA and UCAS). For this reason the table presents information that can only be used as a somewhat rough guide to assessing the classed nature of participation in sociology.

Table 3.2: Socio-economic status of full-time undergraduates accepting places on social studies and combined social science degree programmes 2003

| Socio-Economic Group | Total Acceptances (%) | Male Acceptances (%) | Female Acceptances (%) |
|--|------------------------------|-----------------------------|-------------------------------|
| Higher managerial and professional occupations | 19.5 | 22.5 | 17.1 |
| Lower managerial and professional occupations | 24.0 | 25.1 | 23.0 |
| Intermediate occupations | 12.8 | 12.5 | 13.1 |
| Small employers and own account workers | 5.8 | 5.7 | 5.9 |
| Lower supervisory and technical occupations | 3.5 | 3.5 | 3.4 |
| Semi-routine occupations | 10.7 | 9.1 | 12.1 |
| Routine occupations | 4.2 | 3.7 | 4.6 |
| Unknown | 19.5 | 17.8 | 20.8 |
| Total | 100 | 100 | 100 |

Extracted from UCAS data 2003

Approximately 44% of full-time undergraduates accepting a place on social studies and combined social science degree programmes in 2003 are from the top two socio-economic groups. Conversely, only around 18% of acceptances were taken up by those from the three lowest groups. Obviously, these figures take no account of those from the 'unknown' category, which is one-fifth of all those who accepted.

Given that roughly 40% of the UK population is positioned in the lower four socio-economic categories, it is evident, on the strength of the above figures, that participation is lagging significantly at only 24% of the full-time undergraduate population. By contrast, if around 20% of the population can be categorised as belonging to the upper two socio-economic tiers, it is apparent that – at a rate of participation of some 44% - this group is over represented by a factor of two. At present around four out of every five people from the top two socio-economic groups will enter a degree programme, against one in four from the lower three segments. It is also pertinent to acknowledge that the classed nature of participation in sociology quite closely parallels that of involvement in the sector generally. Or, at the very least, on the above statistics, it is not possible to conclude that sociology is more or less accessible to the working class than any other subject.

Moving to view Table 3.3 it is possible to gain an idea of the rates of participation in sociology by ethnicity and on full-time degree programmes generally. As with participation by class, rates in social studies and the social sciences tend to closely parallel those of the wider undergraduate population.

Table 3.3: Ethnic group of full-time undergraduates accepting places on degree programmes 2003

| Ethnic Group | Total Full-time Social Studies and Combined Social Science Degree Acceptances (%) | Total Degree Acceptances (%) |
|---------------------|--|-------------------------------------|
| White | 74.9 | 77.3 |
| Asian | 10.6 | 9.4 |
| Black | 4.9 | 3.7 |
| Mixed | 2.2 | 2.0 |
| Other | 0.6 | 0.7 |
| Unknown | 7.0 | 7.0 |
| Total | 100 | 100 |

Extracted from UCAS data 2003

With regard to participation by age in full-time social studies and combined social science degrees it can be seen from Table 3.4 that there is a slight tendency for students to be older than average. It must be reiterated here that these figures do not relate directly to sociology, and the table does not take account of the number of part-time students. The QAA Sociology Report noted the high percentage of mature students, students with non-standard entry, and students from access courses in sociology in some institutions. This is likely to have various ramifications, perhaps especially in new universities, for the social organisation of learning due to the fact that older students are more likely to be based in off-campus locations, and will often have different social networks and, perhaps, stronger ties to local communities. The QAA Subject Overview Report for Sociology also provides details of differences in the average GCE A-level point scores of new compared with old universities. While these varied between 16 and 24 in older universities with an average of 19, for new universities they varied between 11 and 17, with a mean of 14.

Table 3.4: Age of full-time undergraduates accepting places on degree programmes 2003

| Age | Total Social Studies and Combine Social Science Degree Acceptances (%) | Total Degree Acceptances (%) |
|--------------|---|-------------------------------------|
| 20 and under | 78.8 | 80.2 |
| 21 – 24 | 8.1 | 9.5 |
| 25 – 39 | 9.9 | 8.1 |
| 40 and over | 3.1 | 2.2 |
| Total | 100 | 100 |

Based on UCAS data, 2003

(b) Destinations

Regarding student destinations Table 3.5 gives breakdowns by percentage to illustrate the form and extent of graduates' engagement in the labour market. Data were taken from a survey of a total of 3,580 graduates. The usual caveats about first destination statistics apply. An important question here relates to the way in which the figure of 67.2% breaks down, and the kinds of employment taken by graduates. This is addressed in Table 3.6.

Table 3.5: Sociology graduate destinations 2001

| Destination | Percentage |
|--|-------------------|
| In UK employment | 67.2 |
| In overseas employment | 1.3 |
| Studying for higher degree | 8.2 |
| Studying for postgraduate teaching qualification | 2.7 |
| Further study in UK | 4.9 |
| Further study overseas | 0.2 |
| Not available for employment, study or training | 7.4 |
| Believed to be unemployed | 6.8 |
| Seeking employment, study or training but not unemployed | 1.3 |
| Total | 100 |

Source: Prospects 2004

Table 3.6: Destinations of sociology 2001 graduates entering employment

| Employment Destination | Percentage |
|--|-------------------|
| Marketing, sales, public relations and advertising | 4.7 |
| Commercial, industrial and public sector managers | 15.3 |
| Teaching professionals | 2.4 |
| Clerical and secretarial | 21.8 |
| Retail | 11.0 |
| Health and childcare | 8.0 |
| Numerical clerks and cashiers | 4.2 |
| Other professionals | 17.3 |
| Business and finance | 2.9 |
| Armed forces | 2.0 |
| Other occupations | 10.4 |
| Unknown | 0.6 |
| Total | 100 |

Source: Prospects 2004

Viewed in relation to destination statistics from the previous year (2000), it is apparent that only minor changes in overall destinations have occurred. Firstly the number of those entering study for higher degrees has fallen slightly, from 8.5% to 8.2% in 2001. Those participating in postgraduate courses leading to teaching qualifications has also decreased by 0.4 percentage points (going from 3.1% in 2000 to 2.7% in 2001). Those reporting to be unemployed rose by almost one percentage point (5.9% in 2000 to 6.8% in 2001).

Section 4: Patterns of Learning and Teaching and Assessment

(a) Course structures

Turning now to organisational aspects of sociology provision, given the widespread occurrence of modular structures¹ it is not a simple matter to summarise patterns of course structure. A common first year including sociology and non-sociology subjects is frequently the case, so that first year studies do not necessarily predetermine the title of the final award. Year 1 course structures leading to branching possibilities in subsequent years, which may include either varieties of labelled sociology awards as a single honours or major, sociology within a joint honours award, or exit sociology from sociology as a main subject. Just what this means for the character of the undergraduate experience as a sociology student (for example, how far he or she is taught in sociology-only or more mixed groups, and the size of these groups, etc) varies widely.

(b) Teaching and learning and assessment

The range of teaching and learning in sociology includes:

- Lectures, with or without opportunity for staff-student interaction
- Tutor-led group activity, including classes/seminars and other small group sessions, ranging from 2-5 persons to groups exceeding 40
- Laboratory and practical classes
- Independent learning in groups or individually
- Audio-visual aids, including film and video
- Minor project and/or major dissertation work

Most courses provide students with well-documented student handbooks, handouts and worksheets. There is an increasing use of computer-assisted learning, usually as a supplement to more conventional forms of learning and teaching.

Modes of assessment employed are varied and, as well as a continued strong reliance on conventional examinations and essays, include projects and practical work. Innovation includes self-assessment, assessed group work and assessed presentations.

No comparable survey on teaching and learning exists to that undertaken for politics (Stammers, et al, 1999). However, patterns of learning and teaching in sociology are discussed in a number of places, notably the QAA Subject Overview Report for Sociology and in FDTL reports on projects arising from the exercise by the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE).

The QAA Subject Overview Report for Sociology noted the wide range of teaching methods used, but also commented on the relatively narrow range of assessment methods employed (also see Chandler 2000). Gubbay et al (2000) reported major variations in the use of IT and communications technologies. Regarding the take-up of innovative approaches more generally, in politics over a three year period only relatively limited shifts in patterns of teaching and learning were discernable. There is no reason to assume that things are markedly different in sociology. Experience in C-SAP suggests that a cadre of innovators, often newer and younger members of staff, are involved in the take-up of new methods. C-SAP questionnaires mainly completed by our link persons and applications for C-SAP funding for minor projects suggest some differences between pre-'92 (old) and post-'92 (new)

¹ The QAA Subject Overview Report for Sociology for England and Northern Ireland identified 83% of courses as provided within modular schemes.

universities, with a relatively small over-representation of academics from newer institutions. There is interest especially in ICT, and in assessment, as well as more particular interest in 'difficult' areas for students such as social theory and research methods. There is an issue of what methods should be taught as part of the sociology core and how these should be taught (see Williams 2003), and particularly a concern about the balance between quantitative and qualitative methods.

Whilst relatively little is influenced by 'proprietary' conceptions of 'deep' and 'surface' learning – as follows from Section 2 above – most sociologists would regard themselves as seeking active critical learning capable of changing conceptions of self and moral commitment (e.g. see Rosie et al 2001; Pescosolido & Aminzade 1999). This contrasts with orientations in other fields, for example, business studies, where a section of staff explicitly adopt a 'pragmatic' pedagogy 'emphasising student acquisition of technical knowledge and skills' (Macfarlane 1997).

(c) Staff development and the relationship between research and teaching

The QAA Subject Overview Report for Sociology noted the importance of the 'scholarship and research interests and activities of staff' in ensuring the up-to-dateness of curricula and syllabuses. Other things being equal – when time is available in the pressurised lives of staff – there is also wider general support for the 'enhancement' activities of C-SAP and the Higher Education Academy. There is a commitment in departments to achieving effective means of student evaluation, but a preference for forms of evaluation that feedback directly into teaching and learning. There is far less support and more usually either ambivalence or outright hostility concerning the QAA. Also one hears increasingly that it is becoming more difficult to involve students in course evaluation. Research of the type being undertaken by the SOMUL project may have to work hard under these circumstances to engage staff and students.

Section 5: 'Quality' and 'Standards'

As for most subjects, ratings for performance in QAA Learning and Teaching assessments is higher for 'older' pre-1992 universities compared with new universities. However, differences in resources between institutions appear to play a part in this. The difference between old and new universities occur despite an increasingly reliance on sessional and/or post-graduate lecturers especially in older universities as senior members of staff become more committed to research and publishing. It should also be remembered however, that, notwithstanding the enhanced resources available to strong research departments, in *all* institutions undergraduate teaching in the social sciences receives funding at the lowest band 1 rate.

The Benchmarking Statement for Sociology describes a 'Threshold achievement' which describe the 'minimally acceptable standards'. The typical 'achievement' describes the 'performance of the average student of sociology at honours level', though this is described as 'less finely calibrated'.

There is also to consider the matter of sociology's particular view of the benchmarking exercise itself. As for most disciplines and with regard for processes of accountability generally, it is clear that there existed a marked degree of ambivalence within the subject – see Wisby (2002), who interviewed key participants in the benchmarking process in sociology. On the one hand sociology's long established tradition of examining critically the roles of institutions in and upon society (and particularly more powerful groups such as professionals) suggests that the subject will be open to moves to assess the ways in which higher education operates. On the other hand, sociology also has a similarly long history of questioning bureaucratic processes, largely as a consequence of Weber's work. Bureaucracies are held to be something of an inevitable product of modern society, for as pre-modern systems of patronage become displaced, it apparently follows that rational structures appear in their place. Such structures, by definition, require a degree of transparency. Whilst this may seem to be a progression from the opaque organising 'systems' of pre-modernity bureaucracy is held to possess its own particular downsides – 'the so-called 'pathologies of audit'. It is thus that sociologists may have more or less strong principled objections to developments such as benchmarking practices (see Jary, 2002 – other related disciplines, e.g. anthropology, have made similar cases, see Shore and Wright, 1999). It remains to be seen how far departments will engage with the Benchmark statements and the wider apparatus of QAA given that the emphasis has shifted to enhancement.

Section 6: General Higher Education Context

As for all subjects in higher education, the learning and teaching in sociology is being profoundly affected by major changes in higher education and society, as well as by political pressures, notably:

- Increasing numbers and declining per capita funding
- Widening participation, different kinds of students and different student demands (although a relative decline of previous levels of 'mature student' involvement in the social sciences)
- Increasing institutional differentiation and widening 'reputational range' of institutions
- Recruitment problems in some institutions
- The pressures of research selectivity and implications of this for learning and teaching and the separation of teaching and research, teaching only contracts and increased use of part-time teachers
- Student choice and the democratisation of learning and teaching
- 'Intensification' of academic labour as the result of increasing numbers and related pressures
- Reduction in levels of student maintenance and an increase in students undertaking term time paid work
- Increased accountability/the 'audit explosion'

Staff morale can be a significant variable. While some staff respond positively, what Trowler (1999) has referred to as academics 'coping with change' and Scott (1997) as 'survivalism' has become a way of life for many staff. Along with the post-modern turn and disciplinary fragmentation, student choice and intensifying academic labour, changes in higher education have led some commentators to detect a mix of Fordist, Post-Fordist, and McDonaldising tendencies in higher education (see Macfarlane 1997; Parker & Jary 1998). Allied with these changes are political factors such as the developments brought about by recent policy initiatives at the national level, especially the 2003 White Paper *The Future of Higher Education*. Above all intended as a response to changes in the global knowledge economy the main 'drivers' of the White Paper are not without tensions (see Jary, 2003). Although the 2003 White Paper and the HEFCE Strategic Plan have sought to make universities more accessible, and to address the classed rates of participation between higher and lower socio-economic groups, they also have as a goal further stratification of institutions across the sector, calling for universities to optimise their strengths. Higher education institutions (HEIs) with a strong record of researching and publishing are encouraged to concentrate their efforts in this sphere. Conversely, those HEIs with lesser research profiles are to focus more attention upon learning and teaching activities.

There is some suggestion (see Jones & Jary 2004) that current policies may be creating more contrasting types of undergraduate sociology courses (see Figure 6.1). Some post-'92 universities appear increasingly concerned to enhance the vocational relevance of sociology by developing links with potential employers (permitting students to gain work experience) and also by reforming syllabuses to encompass more 'practical', 'real-world' issues (such as housing and health, homelessness, sport and leisure, etc.). In terms of benchmarking, the focus in new HEIs may be a tendency towards increased emphasis on generic competences and 'transferable skills.' By contrast, in the 'old' pre-'92 universities, where staff are more likely to be involved in publishing for the purposes of the Research Assessment Exercise², the stress is more likely to remain more squarely on subject-specific knowledge and proficiencies. In line with the tendencies to rebrand sociology (noted in section 2), it may well be that a far more differentiated pattern of sociology provision will emerge, reflecting both pressures from 'political mediations' and student demands. Whether such sharpness of

² 48 institutions submitted to the Sociology panel of the RAE; 18 received a rating of 5* or 5. For strategic reasons, sociologists were also submitted to other panels, notably Social Policy.

differentiation in the students' interests is another issue (Brown & Scase 1992). The institutional differentiation and access and widening participation agendas have created their own specific raft of changes. As yet, the various developments are nascent and more research will be required to gauge their full extent. For example, there is little to suggest that departments have engaged widely with opportunities for developments in the Higher Education Innovation Fund (HEIF). Only two shortlisted Centres for Excellence in Teaching and Learning (CETL) were led by sociology departments.

Figure 6.1: Patterns of student recruitment and curriculum type

| | Selecting institutions – older universities | Recruiting institutions – newer institutions |
|------------------|---|---|
| Types of student | <i>Traditional, younger, relatively homogeneous. Increasing numbers</i> | <i>Widening participation – Diversity. Recruitment and retention problems</i> |
| Curriculum type | <i>Discipline driven</i> | <i>Market driven – more diversified, more work-oriented/vocational curriculum</i> |

References

- Albrow, M. (1986) 'BSA Presidential Address: The Undergraduate Curriculum in Sociology – a core for humane education', *Sociology*, 20(3): 335-46.
- Brown, P. & Scase, R. (1992) *Higher Education and Corporate Realities: Class, Culture and the Decline of Graduate Careers*, London: UCL Press.
- Cann, C. (1999) *Sociologists in Placements – Annual Report*, University of Northumbria.
- Chandler, J. (2000) 'What are benchmarks?' in Harrison, E. & Mears, R. (eds) *Assessment Strategies in Sociology: A Resource Handbook*, Bath Spa University.
- DfES (2003) *The Future of Higher Education*, Cmd 5735 (London, The Stationary Office Ltd).
- Gibbons, M. Limoges, C. Nowotny, H., Scott, P., Schwartzman, S., Scott, P & Trow, M. (1994) *The New Production of Science and Research in Contemporary Society*, London Sage.
- Gubbay, J. (1993) 'Researching the sociology curriculum' in Cross, M. & Payne, G. (eds) *Sociology in Action*, Basingstoke: Macmillan.
- Gubbay, J., Middleton, C. Rosie, A. & Ryan, J. (eds) (2000) *Information and Communication Technologies in Learning and Teaching: Developing Departmental Strategies*, SSP 2000, University of Sheffield.
- Hall, D., Hall, I., Cameron, A & Green, P. (2004) 'Student volunteering and the active community: Issues and opportunities for teaching and learning in sociology', *Learning and Teaching in the Social Sciences*, 1(1):33-50.
- Harrison, E. & Mears, R. (eds) (2000) *Assessment Strategies in Sociology: A Resource Handbook*, Bath Spa University.
- Harrison, E. & Mears, R. (eds) (2001) *Assessment Strategies and Standards in Sociology*, Ashgate.
- HEFCE (03/12) *HEFCE Strategic Plan 2003-08* (Bristol, HEFCE).
- Jary, D. (1978) *The Development of Sociology in the Polytechnics*, SIP Paper No 6, Oxford Polytechnic.
- Jary, D. (ed) (2002) *Benchmarking and Quality Management: The debate in UK Higher Education*, C-SAP Monograph No 1, University of Birmingham.
- Jary, D. (2003) 'Contradictions of a 'radical' HE White Paper', *Network*, No. 85.
- Jones, R. & Jary, D. (2004 forthcoming) *Widening Participation in the Social Sciences*, C-SAP Monograph No 3, University of Birmingham.
- Parker, M. & Jary, D. (1998) 'The McUniversity: Organisation, management and academic subjectivity', *Organization*, 2(2): 319-38.
- Pescosolido, B. & Aminzade, R. (1999) *The Social Worlds of Higher Education – Handbook for teaching in a new century*, Thousand Oaks, Ca.: Pine Forge.
- Macfarlane, B. (1997) 'The Business Studies first degree: Institutional trends and the pedagogic context', *Teaching in Higher Education*, 2(1).
- Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) (n.d.) *Subject Overview Report for Sociology*.
- Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) (n.d.) *Subject Benchmark Statement – Sociology*, www.qaa.ac.uk/crntwork/benchmark/sociology.html.
- Rosie, A., Bufton, S and Hirst, J. (2001) 'Sociology as a moral discourse: a case study of social theory teaching', *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, 22 (2): 217-26.
- Shore, C. and Wright, S. (1999) *Audit Culture and Anthropology: Neo-Liberalism in British Higher Education* in *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*, December 1999, 5(4) 557-75.
- Scott, P. (1997) 'The postmodern university?' in Smith, A. & Webster, F.(eds) (1997) *The Postmodern University – Contested visions of higher education in society*.
- Smith, A. & Webster, F. (eds) (1997) *The Postmodern University – Contested visions of higher education in society*, Buckingham, SRHE/Open University Press.
- Stammers, N., Dittmar, H. & Henney, J. (1999) 'Teaching and learning politics: a survey of practices and change in UK universities', *Political Studies*, 47: 114-126.
- Trowler, P. (1999) *Academics Responding to Change: New Higher Education Frameworks and Academic Cultures*, Buckingham, SRHE/Open University Press.
- Wallerstein, E. et al (1996) *Open the Social Science* Report of the Gulbenkian Commission on the Restructuring of the Social Sciences, Stanford University Press.

- Williams, M. (2003) 'Who's counting in Sociology?' *Network*, No86.
- Wisby, E. (2002) 'The Regulatory and Developmental Functions of Subject Benchmarking: the case of Sociology', in *Benchmarking and Quality Management in UK Higher Education*, ed. D. Jary.

Further Resources

1. Various comprehensive lists of 'departments of sociology' with live links are available on the following websites:
 - a) British Sociological Association: www.Britsoc.co.uk/
 - b) *Sociological Research On-Line*: www.socresonline.org.uk

2. The following are available on the C-SAP website:
www.c-sap.bham.ac.uk/projects/findings:
 - a) '*Findings*' reports on all completed C-SAP funded projects
 - b) Analysis of C-SAP Questionnaire to Link Persons and Heads of Department

3. *CRAC Degree Course Guides 2003/4 No 10 – Sociology, Anthropology and Social Policy* provides a comprehensive listing of departments and course content.

Appendix

CENTRE FOR HIGHER EDUCATION RESEARCH AND INFORMATION

Economic and Social Research Council: Teaching and Learning Research Programme (TLRP) - Phase III Research Project

What is learned at university? The social and organisational mediation of university learning (SOMUL)

Project Applicants: Prof John Brennan (Open University)
Prof David Jary (University of Birmingham)
Prof Mike Osborne (University of Stirling)
Prof John Richardson (Open University)

Project Summary

The aim of the project is to increase our understanding of the range of learning outcomes of an increasingly diverse higher education system. We are particularly interested in how these are socially and organisationally mediated. Social mediation refers primarily to the social mix of students and the characteristics of the student culture and lifestyle. Organisational mediation refers primarily to curriculum organisation (for example, the boundaries between different subjects and the links – formal and informal - between academic knowledge and workplace and other sources of knowledge).

The study will concentrate on students and graduates in three contrasting subjects – biochemistry, business studies and sociology. For each subject, five study programmes will be selected to represent the different social and organisational features in which the project is interested. Students from these programmes will be investigated at various stages during and following their undergraduate careers focusing on their conceptions of learning and personal and professional identity. The results will be set within the context of subject benchmark statements and programme specifications.

The wider applicability of findings from the initial three subjects will be assessed in relation to a further group of subjects, again taking a range of programmes with different social and organisational characteristics.

The project team will work closely with the new Higher Education Academy and with the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education in order to ensure close links with policy and practice. Employer inputs to the project will be secured through regular presentations to the policy forum of the Council for Industry and Higher Education.