The social mediation of university learning

This is the third 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).

This working paper focuses on the social mediation of learning i.e. how the social interactions generated by contrasted experiences of studying impact on learning outcomes within an increasingly diverse higher education system.

The project is part of the Economic and Social Research Council’s Teaching and Learning Research Programme. It began in 2004 and will be completed at the end of 2007. The project is being 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 project is now entering its analysis and writing up stages. Several papers have already been presented at conferences and seminars. During the final year of the project, the implications for higher education policy and practice will be explored jointly with the Academy and others.
Project aim and summary

The aim of the project is 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 is exploring the relationships between:

conceptions of learning outcomes:

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

and 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

The fourth working paper will be on approaches to study.

For more detailed information, including the project timetable and downloadable copies of other papers in this series, please visit the project website:

www.open.ac.uk/cheri/somulhome.htm

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This paper is concerned with how different forms or manifestations of ‘social mediation’ may impact on the contemporary undergraduate student experience and on learning outcomes.

The overall aims and objectives of the SOMUL project were reported by Brennan and Jary in the first working paper What is learned at university? (2005). Briefly put, the project seeks to highlight how university learning ‘is affected by the way courses are organised, by the places in which it is happening, by the people one is learning alongside, by the reasons people have for studying, by the other things that are going on in their lives’ (Brennan & Jary, 2005: 3). These factors are summed up in the project’s central notion of ‘organisational and social mediation’.

Our understanding of the social mediation of university learning experience has been broadly defined in the SOMUL proposal as the ‘life situations of the students on a particular programme of study – individually and collectively – and including the social and educational backgrounds of the students as well as features of the student culture within the particular institution’. Put in those terms, the social mediation of the learning experience touches on a large range of the social aspects of universities as institutions and organisations.

Presenting contexts as key determining factors of the learning process may seem a truism nowadays, but it has been shown that the most established and influential research strand in ‘approaches to learning’ (Biggs, 1987; Entwistle & Ramsden, 1983; Marton & Saljo, 1976) still tends to avoid ‘any real engagement with the complexities of location and context’ (Haggis, 2003: 101). Sociologists themselves have also seemingly stayed away – in the UK at least – from learning and teaching contexts, a field sometimes presented as ‘captured by psychologists, learning technology specialists and educational developers’ (Deem, 2004: 35). Our attempt to bring to light the range of social factors affecting the levels and forms of engagements of students with their subject, their modes of integration in and identification with the student community, seeks to bridge this gap. It draws on a range of UK and international sociologically-based and other studies and preliminary findings from our own research in 13 UK universities.
To help illustrate the factors that might impact as social mediation, it is useful to set up some simple dichotomies that reflect differences in the types of institutions studied and the social composition of their respective intakes. Is it for instance reasonable to suggest that where groups are largely homogeneous in terms of social class, individual experiences are broadly similar due to aspects of shared norms, values and behaviours? Also, how might the experiences of commuting and residential students within the same institution and studying the same subject result in a differentiated student experience? These questions are illustrated below in boxes to highlight some of the striking features of the social mediation operating in all the case study universities.

‘Imported’ mediation: social inequalities and stratification in higher education

How diverse?

No account of the social mediation of a higher education experience can be considered without being situated in the particular historical context in which this mediation manifests itself. Higher education in the UK was until recently seen as an elite system serving the needs of the predominantly white, male, middle and upper-middle classes and as such was seen as reproducing and consolidating existing power and privilege.

For four decades, and particularly since the early 1990s, there has been a continual expansion in university places in the UK. However, the class composition of participants is proving resistant to change:

Fewer than one in five young people from the lower social class groups (IlIlm, IV and V) participate in HE and, although this proportion has been increasing, it remains well below the 45 per cent who participate from the higher social class groups (IlIn, II and I), a figure which has also been increasing rapidly over the years. Lower social class groups represent 28 per cent of the total entrants to full-time undergraduate study, a lower share than their 39 per cent in the UK population as a whole. In particular institutions and subjects, the proportion of HE students from lower social class groups can range from as low as 10 per cent to above 40 per cent.

(Connor et al., 2001)

On that basis, it is widely recognised that inequality on the grounds of social class is still prevalent. Furthermore, they suggest that existing sources of inequality such as lack of information and knowledge about the system have been exacerbated by the introduction of fees and the abolition of the maintenance grant (Reay et al, 2001).

Indeed, research carried out by the Centre for Economic Performance, and supported by the Sutton Trust, suggests that education is, despite the recent emphasis on widening participation, doing less today to improve social mobility and that there is less chance now than previously of children being upwardly mobile (Blandin et al, 2005). For these commentators:

Intergenerational mobility fell markedly over time in Britain, with there being less mobility for a cohort of people born in 1970 compared to a cohort born in 1958. (p. 2)

Other useful social indicators of the diversification that SOMUL seeks to reflect upon include a steady but unevenly distributed reduction in geographical study mobility, and a diversification of modes of student accommodation marked by the rise of the student-commuter model as shown in Box 1.
Box 1: Sociologies?

Collapsed data from the SOMUL questionnaire and from HESA data covering our sites indicate that Sociology cannot be said to be more or less accessible to the working class and non-traditional entrants than any other subject.

However, a closer look at two contrasted sites shows noteworthy differences or inequalities which emerge from the connection of socio-demographic indicators (such as the region of origin of students and their socio-economic status) with patterns of choice of subject and institution, integration in the student milieu and campus life, etc.

Of the five Sociology case studies, only one (SOC 14) is claiming a truly national student recruitment. Although not the most reputed Sociology Department, it is located in a prestigious university. By contrast another (SOC 13) shows a strong regional inclination in its recruitment, in line with the national trend towards the regionalisation of UK universities (see Figure 1).

It will come as no surprise that SOC 14 also stands out in terms of socio-economic background of its students, and appears less open to admitting students through access courses. Figure 2 shows that SOC 13 is admitting far more students from minority ethnic groups than SOC 14. It appears from our interviews that in SOC 13 the possibility of commuting from home was a key element in some students’ choice of institution for economic and/or cultural reasons.
A cultural encounter?

The trends outlined above suggest that today’s students bring with them a wide range of expectations and forms of engagement originating from their varied social backgrounds and study in diverse institutional environments. The issue of what matters (institutional/non-institutional) in the formation of student identities and how they relate to learning outcomes in less integrated environments is subject to much debate (McInnis, 2002). This is a key dimension of SOMUL’s approach (see Brennan & Jary, 2005).

At the heart of this process is the individualisation of student trajectories. Bourdieu and Passeron suggested in *The Inheritors* (1979) that students from the working class in France had to put in more effort at university because they needed to adapt to the cultural codes of higher education and go through a process of acculturation. Studies have also shown that in the UK the curriculum content itself “is biased in favour of those things with which middle class students were already extra-curricularly familiar” (Robbins, 1993: 152). Whether this widely acknowledged bias still operates in the same terms in multilayered and massified HE systems has been the object of recent analysis (e.g. Ball et al, 2002) and is one of the key dimensions of our comparative approach to social mediation.

In relation to information and knowledge of the system, it has been suggested that those from lower socio-economic backgrounds often do not have the cultural and social capital which allows them to access up to date, relevant and accurate information, thus creating barriers to their participation in higher education (Archer et al, 2003). The picture that emerges from our interview data is that, although choices are undoubtedly socially determined, most students seem well aware of institutional differences and tend to develop ‘realistic’ choice strategies.

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**Box 1, continued from page 5**

Unsurprisingly, the two cases offer contrasted pictures in terms of term-time accommodation patterns despite very similar residential arrangements (all Year 1 students are offered the possibility of university accommodation) and campus locations (large urban environments in both cases). Students at SOC 14 tend to comply with the archetypal image of a “residential university experience” (85% stay in university accommodation in year 1 and nearly 80% move off campus in year 2 (Figures 3 and 4). By contrast SOC 13 offers a “commuter profile” with equal proportions of year 1 students on campus and “at home” and no significant movement towards student rented accommodation in year 2.
informed by various sources. Parental involvement, school guidance, classmates and personal strategy appear to interplay. Using our Bioscience cases as illustration, Box 2 shows how the justification of choices expressed by students also tends to inform the type of degree scheme they are doing (more academic or predominantly vocational) and their rapport with the university where they study.

**Box 2: Issues of choice (Biosciences)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Bioscience students at universities (BIO 9 and BIO 10) tended to make choices on the basis of academic excellence to provide a short list of those to apply to – this was often followed by a visit, where impressions gained on Open Days were important influences. A thriving nightlife was secondary but important. In the case of BIO 6 some students almost took it for granted they would go there through family connections and the ‘old school tie’.</th>
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<tr>
<td>“Uni of X and BIO 10 were at loggerheads for what I chose as my first choice and it was one or the other... I chose BIO 10 basically because it’s the best, well bar Oxford, Cambridge it’s the best and when I came up for the open day I had a pretty fun time...” (X, Y3, Biochemistry, BIO 10)</td>
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<tr>
<td>“It was actually my second choice. I didn’t get into my first, because I missed out on the grades, and I chose BIO 10 mainly because of its location, near to home and the reputation of the University as well. Really came on the Open Day and it just kind of had a feel ...” (Y, Y3, Microbiology, BIO 10)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“I knew I wanted to go to BIO 9. I knew I wanted to do a Biology-related course, so I just chose one and that happened to be the one. I was just enjoying, we were doing that particular aspect of our Course in our A-levels at the time, and I was enjoying it so I thought well why not?” (Z, Y3, Medical Microbiology, BIO 9)</td>
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<tr>
<td>“When I applied I knew it was BIO 6 University, and I applied purely on the basis of the advertisement of the degree... Friends of my parents who are former lecturers at BIO 6 came in to vouch for me, and I was offered a place here... apparently the vouching was unnecessary...” (A, Y3, Biomedical Sciences, BIO 6)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Well I applied to Cambridge and didn’t get in, as most people do, but I applied to BIO 6 partly because of the flexibility... and because it’s got a good reputation, and when I came here for the Open Day I really enjoyed it and kind of fitted in really well. And a couple of my Geography teachers went to BIO 6... so partly why as well.” (B, Y3, Molecular Biology and Biochemistry, BIO 6)</td>
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<tr>
<th>In the other cases (BIO 7 and BIO 8) geographical location near to home was a major consideration for many students with academic considerations not as important, their own lower tariff scores perhaps limiting their institutional choice. In addition these institutions may appear to be more welcoming to non-traditional entrants as one of the quotes from BIO 7 suggests.</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>“...I did the Course I wanted to do. It sounded interesting, and the grades tallied with what I had as well, so...” (C, Y3, Human Biology, BIO 7)</td>
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<tr>
<td>“I was ill for quite a while and I was retired from my job as a nurse and I thought well I need something to stimulate my brain. So I thought I’m off work anyway. I may as well put it to good use and the first place I approached, which was here because I used to work in City 7, they were very helpful and accommodating because I actually applied late after the clearing...” (D, Y3, Human Biology, BIO 7)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Because I’m from City 8 anyway, I like City 8 overall, because my family’s here, my friends are here.” (E, Y3, Biomedical Sciences BIO 8)</td>
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<td>“(One)... my friend was at university here and he’d been here for a couple of years and I came over a couple of times and liked it. Two, they accepted me and also it was like far enough away from home to be away from my parents but close enough...” (F, Y3, Biochemistry BIO 8)</td>
</tr>
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</table>
Leathwood and Connell (2003) explored the perceptions of non-traditional aspirants to higher education while Davies et al (2002) examined older aspirants in relation to the decision of where to apply, and the reasons underlying these choices. For some, there was an explicit perception that some institutions were ‘for people like them’ and that some institutions were not. We haven’t found such explicit perceptions in significant numbers in the SOMUL interview data, but socio-demographic indicators and students’ justification of their choice were found to reflect in no small measure the type of institution they are in.

However, from the first elements of our fieldwork there seems to be less consistency between the values transmitted by the curriculum and those embodied by the institutions than suggested by some of the above literature, and even if academic culture remains “not uniformly accessed or experienced” (Read et al, 2003), the project would question, on the grounds of institutional diversity, the common assumption that “academic culture predominantly reflects the dominant discourse of the student learner as white, middle-class and male” (Ibid.). It also seems much more difficult to identify in this context a clear alignment between the values of institutions, and those of a homogeneous category such as ‘middle-class’. This may still operate in very selective universities where, as emerged from our Sociology sample, the institution rather than the subject is targeted by students and where the social recruitment under the widening participation agenda shows even greater social closure. Two students from this university explained how demanding it had been for them to adapt to the tacit rules of a student life in which others seemed to adapt like fishes in water. But overall, the diversification of the higher education field on the one hand and its competitive nature on the other suggest a greater adaptation of each institution to the socio-cultural traits of its targeted student ‘clientele’.

Moreover, the concepts of middle-class and middle-class culture need further elaboration following the claims by some commentators of the dramatic expansion of this “class” in most western societies since the mid-20th century as a result of increased opportunities for upward mobility with the growth of the service class (Goldthorpe, 1987; Breen & Goldthorpe, 1999).

This is not to suggest that socially acquired predispositions are not key mediations on student learning or in the shaping of student social identities. We would not object to Bourdieu’s view on the role the school system plays in “ratifying, sanctifying and transforming the cultural inheritance that comes from the family as scholastic merit” (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977). Indeed students’ socio-economic background and past school trajectories are essential to SOMUL, although less for their direct impact on academic performance than for their influence on the lives of students and on their interactions with others on their course. In other words, to better appreciate the weight of organisational mediation on student learning, a clear understanding of the values and forms of self selection brought into the institution by the students is required (Hatcher, 1998). SOMUL tries to capture, in particular through first-year student interviews, how students’ retrospective rationalisation of choice and admission reflects differences in class-cultural values but also an increasingly individualised (the French sociologist Francois Dubet uses the term “atomised”) student experience (diversity of origins, trajectories and projects).

The social mediation of the college experience

In this section we will try to elaborate further on social mediation by looking at it from the collective academic and non-academic experience of students within their institutions. Two strands of literature are directly relevant to this dimension of our project. They are the ‘college experience’ literature and the ‘academic identities’ literature summarised in the first working paper (Brennan & Jary, op cit p. 4), which take students’ achievement as a starting point, but go a step beyond the learning theories, and incorporate elements of
the ‘learning environment’ in the understanding of student learning and achievement.

A holistic experience?

These strands of research touch on different aspects of student socialisation from different disciplinary perspectives but do not suggest a clear demarcation between academic and non-academic experiences of students as far as learning experiences and outcomes are concerned.

The expression ‘college experience’ commonly refers to the American literature which, since the early 1960s, has looked at the developmental influence of college on students. Some of the key references in this literature are the reviews by Feldman and Newcomb (1969) and E.T. Pascarella and P.T. Terenzini (2005), and consider outcomes such as cognitive skills and competences, self-conceptions, attitudes and values, educational attainment, etc. One of the key dimensions of the process appears to be the residential one. In conclusion of their review, Pascarella and Terenzini suggest that “Living on rather than off campus does promote more positive and inclusive racial-ethnic attitudes and openness to diversity” (2005: 603). This does not really come as a surprise; student life in American colleges had for long been pictured as “a dense network of social relationships, institutional demands and constraints, and temporally connected contingencies” (Becker et al, 1968). Our own initial findings suggest that the influence of the type of residential provision on the formation of peer networks remains strong in the current UK context and that, overall, residence remains one of the most obvious areas of overlap between social and organisational mediation. It is therefore essential to measure what relations can be established between the type of accommodation provided, its management and cost, and the effects halls, lodgings and home residence have today on student socialisation and participation. Craig McInnis (2002) and others invite us to do it cautiously and to re-think the responsibility of the university environment for managing the nature and level of student engagement (the centrality of the university infrastructure in the student experience).

The SOMUL project has already shed light on these crucial questions through the collection of student voices across different subjects, from different backgrounds, age, gender, on the one hand, and on the other hand the expectations of their institutional environment grasped through analysis of official documents (such as websites, student handbooks, course specifications), academic staff interviews, observations of curriculum and other organisational arrangements. Again, as suggested in Box 3, the interplay of social and organisational factors creates patterns that transcend the old binary divide.
**Box 3: Accommodation and its impact on social integration and academic engagement in higher education**

**BIO 8:** Based on a city centre campus with a mix of residential (around 2,000 university-owned ‘beds’ with a guarantee for all first-year entrants) and commuting students. A Post-1992 institution which stresses links with industry and the vocational relevance of its courses. Over 90% of entrants from state schools and over 40% classified as working class (Guardian, 2005)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Student A</th>
<th>Student B</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(Y3, Biomedical Sciences, BIO 8)</td>
<td>(Y3, Biological Sciences, BIO 8)</td>
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**Accommodation**

- **Student A:** No, I commute from City X (ten minutes by train). I live at home... I don't do anything within the University environment.
- **Student B:** I think it’s good to start in halls when you don’t know anyone but I’ve been back to halls and I’ve been in houses, so I’ve been all over.

**Social**

- **Student A:** No, my social life is all in City X, with my friends in City X. So it’s like two separate things really.
- **Student B:** ... because like I met somebody in the choir and then like going out with them.... and football's normally training on a Tuesday and then matches on a Wednesday. I've got kind of different friends from sort of everywhere...

**Engagement**

- **Student A:** I'd say 3 to 4 [days a week] because I usually can come in on days that I'm like, just like today.... I'll be using the library today.... so I'd say 4 at the max
- **Student B:** Pretty much I'd say every day, but I only have lectures 3 days now I think, so I've got 2 days off. But I normally come in like to check things... go to the library maybe...

As the above quotes show, the difference between residential and commuting students is apparent when social interactions based around the university are considered. However, it is interesting, for these two students at least, that they evince relatively similar patterns of engagement in terms of accessing the campus for academic purposes.
In a Bioscience and a Business Studies case

**BS 1** is a new locally-oriented university, with mainly local, but some international students. The University is located in a conurbation of 2.6 million people. Mix of residential (around 700 university-owned ‘beds’ with a guarantee for all first-year entrants) and commuting students. The Business Studies cohort is heterogeneous in terms of social and educational backgrounds (65% enter aged 21 and over, 55% already have an HE qualification). Cohorts in Business Studies are small in number and taught in a classroom as opposed to lecture environment.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Student A</th>
<th>Student B</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>(Y3 Business Studies, F) international full-time Has no family commitments, but works 20 hours per week.</strong></td>
<td><strong>(Y3 Business Studies, F) local full-time student. Has no family commitments, but works 10 hours a month.</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I live in a University hall of residence… I have to live in a flat with six people and it’s like impossible to live there. It’s like just coming home, take a shower, go to bed.</td>
<td>I live with my boyfriend and his family</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Actually I have no really leisure time. It’s just studying and working but if I have some leisure time I try to go to the town centre with some friends meeting. Or sometimes I am doing babysitting and for me it’s leisure time as well because I can walk around and things like this.</td>
<td>They do have study groups, I think last month they had study improvement lessons I suppose on the Tuesday and Wednesday. But I was obviously working. …But any activities they have done I haven’t been on any.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How about clubs and sports?</td>
<td>How about clubs and sports?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yeah, there’s a gym. It’s not a big gym but yeah there’s a gym…I’m not into it, but there’s things going on.</td>
<td>Yeah, there’s a gym. It’s not a big gym but yeah there’s a gym…I’m not into it, but there’s things going on.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I think it’s around 20 hours a week for studying on my own…</td>
<td>I do about two and a half days a week worth out. One and a half day on lessons, and a day in like this where I spent half of the day here…</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oh it’s a lot because I have no computer at home. I therefore must come here to use the computer and therefore it’s the most time of the week…. Everyday yes. Including weekend!</td>
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Student A spends a great deal more time on campus than student B, probably because she lives in halls that she finds uncomfortable and so spends as little time as possible in the residence. None of them seem to engage in social activities at university although for different reasons: A has long part-time working hours and B commutes from home and might therefore have a social life independent from the university.
What disciplinary knowledge and values are transmitted and how?

It is commonly accepted that strong disciplinary norms and traditions (the ‘pure/applied’, the rigidity or openness of the curriculum and the social organisation of disciplines) interplay with social structures. In other words, even in a ‘modular world’, the student body is by no means immune to such differences between the fields of study, hence the importance in Huber’s view of the social characteristics of academics and the “place of disciplines in social space” (Huber, 1990). This point is of crucial importance to our own research. The social relevance of a subject is partly reflected by lecturers’ attitudes and identity, and partly by differing socio-economic considerations and perceptions among students. Students’ perception of the utility of their studies is likely to fluctuate over time and therefore needs to be understood alongside the evolution of their interest in the subject they are doing.

As suggested earlier, the interplay between social and academic structures in the making of student cultures (or subcultures) has become a source of concern, with empirical evidence indicating that in fragmented higher education landscapes academic culture is not uniformly accessed or experienced. An interesting research strand is developing about the relationship between students’ socio-cultural background, their subject of study and how this is mediated by the institutional and disciplinary culture. SOMUL seeks to capture these forms of ‘cultural negotiation’ in their making though student interviews, drawing on the frameworks provided by authors such as McInnis (2002) and Dubet (1994) who tend to question the centrality of the organisational infrastructure in shaping student cultures and identities.

Conclusion

The inability of the ‘college effect’ literature to make sense of the institutional and social diversification of higher education experiences in the UK calls for new definitions of the student experience, encompassing its non-institutional dimension (term-time work, family life, etc) and taking into account the social environment of the institution. Silver (2003) and others suggest that even within such a broad and loose framework, there would still be a minimum common denominator in the definition of what it is to be a student, since the students themselves – when asked about their status – refer first to “being a student”.

The centre of a research focus on social mediation should therefore revolve around the nature of the relation between this sense of ‘belonging’ (to a department, a university, a particular group of students) and of ‘being’ (a ‘student’, a ‘student in’ and/or a ‘student at’) and the outcome of the university experience. This personal/institutional cultural encounter in contrasted subjects and institutional settings tends to be seen as constituting differentiated outcomes rather than as impacting on approaches to learning and outcomes.
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