

WHAT IS LEARNED AT UNIVERSITY

SOMUL

The Social and Organisational
Mediation of University Learning

Working Paper 2

December 2005

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The organisational mediation of university learning

This is the second 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 second working paper focuses on the organisational mediation of learning, i.e. how institutional characteristics shape the student experience and resultant 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. It seeks to explore what students are learning in an increasingly diverse higher education system.

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.

Working Paper 1 - providing an overview of the project - was published by the Academy in May 2005.

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.

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 will focus primarily on three subject fields, selected as representative of 'science', 'social science' and 'broadly vocational' courses:

- biochemistry
- sociology
- business studies.

The **project team** is based at:

- The Open University (Centre for Higher Education Research and Information and Institute of Educational Technology)
- University of Stirling (Centre for Research in Lifelong Learning)

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

- The Higher Education Academy and its 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.

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

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

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The organisational mediation of university learning

by John Brennan and Mike Osborne

In an important sense, the SOMUL project is about diversity in higher education, diversity in terms of the organisational forms through which it is provided, and diversity in terms of the social and educational backgrounds of students and of their lifestyles while in higher education. The two senses of diversity are inter-related, both conceptually and empirically. SOMUL is exploring this inter-relationship and, crucially, its relationship to 'what is learned' in higher education. This paper focuses on the *organisational* mediation of learning, on how the project's conceptualisation of this has developed and how it is being applied in the fieldwork. The concept of *social* mediation will be addressed in a later working paper. However, because the two concepts are so inter-linked, some general thoughts on higher education diversity and the mediation of university learning are necessary at the outset.

Mass systems of higher education tend to be differentiated systems. This is central to their ability to perform a wide range of sometimes apparently contradictory functions. Differentiation is both vertical (i.e. status and prestige differences) and horizontal (e.g. subject and curricular differences). Differentiation in these two senses applies both to higher education institutions and to the students who pass through them. Higher education both selects (i.e. assigns a public status to those it 'processes') and it socialises/trains (i.e. transmits a body of knowledge, skills, attitudes and dispositions supposedly appropriate to the assigned statuses). Both selection and socialisation are increasingly differentiated in mass higher education systems – it matters a lot *what* and *where* you study. Public perceptions are of close links between selection and socialisation functions: the graduate from a high status institution/course is presumed to have better/different knowledge, skills, attitudes and dispositions than one from a lower status institution/course. In other words,

institutional statuses are transmitted to the students. However, the ways in which the graduates actually do differ are rather unclear. Indeed, there are elaborate bureaucratic procedures – via subject benchmarks and quality assurance – to minimise the differences while, at the same time, public pronouncements from government and others – for example, references to 'top universities' – appear designed to accentuate them.

The different areas of diversity with which the SOMUL project is concerned are summarised in figure 1. In examining the higher education experience, the diagram distinguishes between the 'collective' experiences of students within a particular institutional/organisational setting and the 'personalised' experiences of individual students in those settings. This is not quite the same distinction as between social and organisational mediation but it is close to it. Organisational mediation of learning is essentially collective – it affects all those students who 'pass this way'. Social mediation is partly personalised – students bring with them backgrounds and expectations and lives outside the university that 'personalise' the experience of study. But students also create collective values, expectations and lifestyles (which we might call 'student culture') that potentially affect all students within the educational setting (though in different ways). And one of the ways in which organisational factors impact upon students is through the opportunities they provide for the creation of student cultures and sub-cultures.

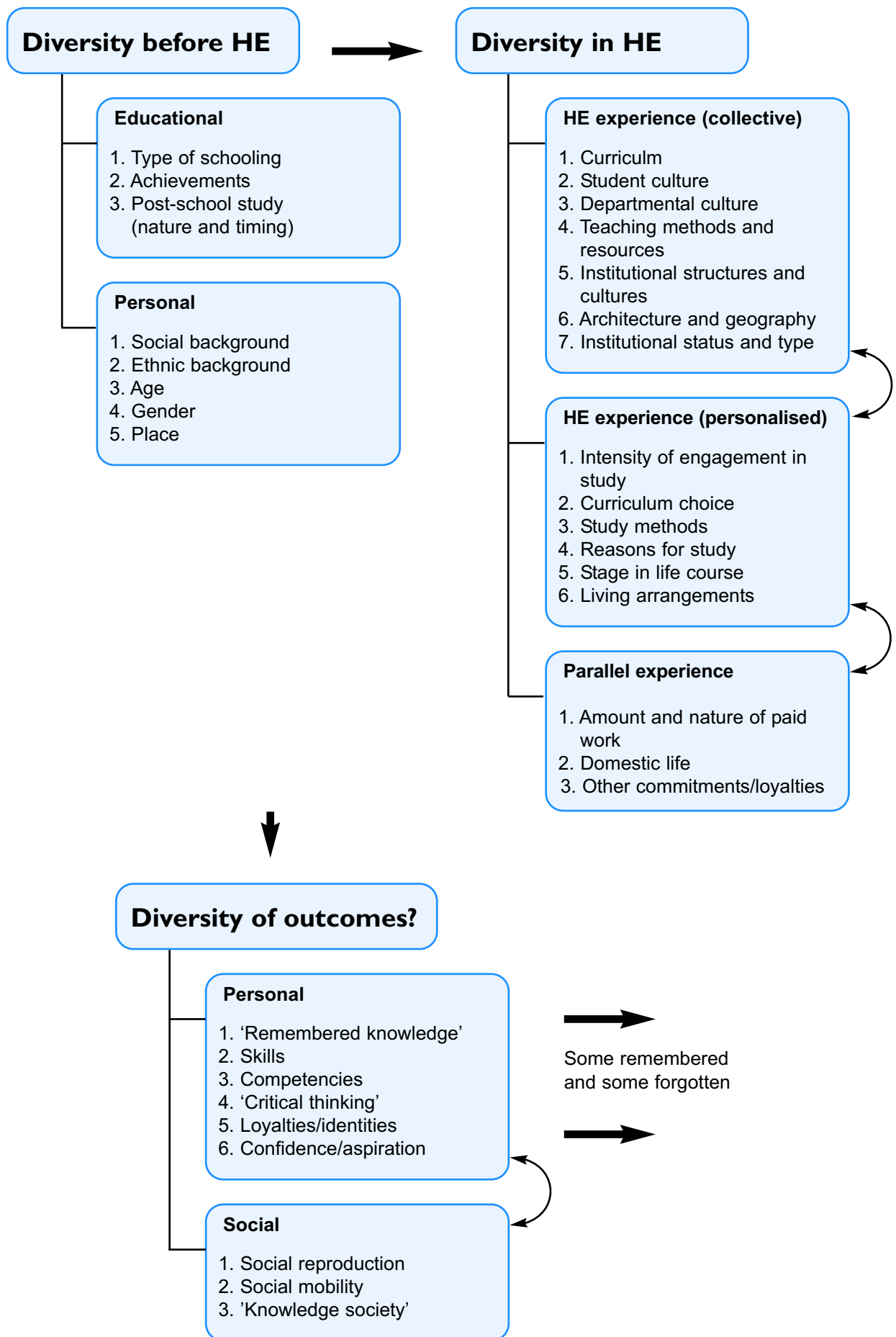


Figure 1: What is learned at university

The project's initial conceptualisation of *social mediation* was described in the following way:

“By social mediation we refer to 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 or programme – together providing the ‘social context of study’.”

Effectively, this draws attention to three forms of social difference. First, there are differences arising from the social and educational backgrounds of the students that are *imported* into higher education and that determine students' initial competences, expectations and ambitions in higher education. Second, there are differences in the student experience during higher education that are *externally generated* and that determine student lifestyle choices and necessities (where to live, whether to take a part-time job, domestic commitments etc). Third, there are differences in the student experience that are *internally generated* within higher education and that determine both his or her studies and the level and nature of the student's engagement with other aspects of university life (for example, clubs, sport, drink etc). Crucially, all three forms of social difference are inter-related. They are also related to the project's other key concept of 'organisational mediation'.

The project's conceptualisation of 'organisational mediation' was described initially as follows:

“By organisational mediation, we refer to the ways in which curriculum knowledge is organised, including the influences of modularity, extended student choice and different modes of study – together providing the ‘principles of curriculum organisation’.”

We drew on the sociologist Basil Bernstein's concepts of the classification and framing of knowledge within educational curricula and on related notions of 'boundary' and 'control': boundaries between what may be learned and not learned and control over the sequencing and selection of what is learned within those boundaries. Boundaries are

drawn differently in different places and are relatively more 'open' or 'closed'. Learning opportunities and expectations also vary in their explicitness to students – 'visible' and 'invisible' pedagogies in Bernstein's terms. And what may be 'visible' to one student may be 'invisible' to another student from a different social or educational background (Bernstein, 1996).

Organisational mediation itself has a strong social element. The way curricula are organised can determine who will study alongside whom, whether learning is a collective or an individual experience, the nature of student interaction with academic staff, and whether student leisure and friendship patterns are shaped 'within' the study programme or are largely outside it.

We recognised when we started the project – and recognise even more so now – that there are important organisational factors that go beyond and are not directly related to curricular matters. These include 'whole institutional' factors, including relatively clear-cut ones such as status, size, location, and rather more complex ones such as institutional culture and tradition. And similar factors operate locally within institutions and can differ between departments within the same institution. Factors related to the department's relationship to its wider subject field and to its relationships (both horizontal and vertical) within its home institution may also be important. This of course makes the questionable assumption that subject and department are one and the same, something – as the project is discovering – that appears to be less and less the case.

In the rest of this paper, we discuss how the project's conception of organisational mediation is evolving.

A differentiated student experience

Let us consider for a moment the experiences of five students. It happens that they are all studying English, but in different institutions.

Student A takes 80% of her English degree courses with the same group of 25 students, all from similar social and

educational backgrounds. Teaching takes place within the English Studies Department which occupies its own separate building off the main university campus. No students from other degree programmes are present at her classes. She shares a house with other English students. She undertakes no term-time work and lives far from home.

Student B also takes 80% of his English degree with the same group of 40 students although they are quite a diverse bunch. There are also students from other degree programmes (around 30% of the class) present. Teaching takes place in the general teaching buildings at the heart of the main campus. He lives in the hall of residence, also on campus. He undertakes no term-time work and lives far from home.

Student C only takes 20% of her English degree with the same group of students. Most teaching takes place in large classes and around 80% of the students are not English 'majors'. Teaching is in the general teaching buildings on the main campus. She lives in shared accommodation off campus with her boyfriend (studying accountancy) and some of his friends. She has a part-time job (around 15 hours a week) and quite often goes home at weekends. (She lives less than 50 miles away.)

Student D does 'quite a lot' of English as part of his Combined Humanities degree. He senses that there are several students like him studying 'quite a lot' of English but he is not quite sure who they are in the large classes he attends in the general teaching building on the main campus. He lives at home with his wife and two children and works around 20 hours a week as a painter and decorator. He collects the children from school on two afternoons a week and has lead responsibility at home for supermarket shopping, ironing and cutting the grass. His elderly mother is quite ill and he visits her regularly.

Student E had an experience like student B in year one of her course but in years two and three it was more like student C.

Do students A, B, C, D and E learn the same things while at university? This is the central question that the SOMUL project is attempting to answer.

The experiences of these five students differ in all sorts of ways. One way of conceptualising at least some of these differences utilises the notion of 'boundary': boundaries between study programmes and individual modules, physical boundaries between different spaces within the institution, boundaries between the university and the world outside, boundaries between being a student and being a worker, parent, wife/husband. Boundaries differ both in where they are drawn and in their strength. Institutions make boundaries through their organisational forms. But students also build their own boundaries in managing their lives as students as part of a larger 'life world'.

Boundaries also imply relationships, i.e. between the things that the boundaries attempt to keep apart. This element of the project's conceptualisation has been heavily influenced by Bernstein's concept of the 'classification' of educational knowledge. Classification, in Bernstein's terms, refers to relations between categories (academic subjects, occupations, work/leisure) which need 'space in which to develop their unique identity' (Bernstein, 1996). Yet across British higher education in recent years, the growth of interdisciplinarity, Personal Development Planning, greater student choice, and term-time working among full-time students may all provide threats to existing boundaries, categories and relationships based largely on established academic disciplines.

A further element of Bernstein's conceptualisation ('framing') refers us to the control or regulation of what is learned within a set of boundaries. It is about 'who controls what', including the selection of what is to be learned, its sequencing, its pacing, and the criteria for determining that learning has occurred.

With strong framing, the 'transmitter' has explicit control over the above. Where framing is weak, the 'acquirer' has apparent control over at least some of the above. Strong framing would require the learner to be 'conscientious, attentive, industrious, careful, receptive'. Weak framing would require the

learner to be 'creative, to be interactive, to attempt to make his or her mark' (Bernstein, 1996, p28).

Strong framing produces *visible pedagogic practice* where the rules and requirements are explicit. Weak framing produces *invisible pedagogic practice* where the rules are implicit and largely unknown to the learner.

To illustrate, consider two examples of learning situations. In one, a university teacher identifies a book, written by the same teacher, as the key text within which all necessary knowledge for successful completion of the course is held. In the other, a student presents a report based on a piece of workplace learning for assessment by the teacher. In the first, there is a large power discrepancy between teacher and learner. (The teacher is not just the transmitter of knowledge but its creator in this case.) But what is required of the student is explicit: 'read my book'. In the second case, power relations are more complex. It is the student's own workplace knowledge, after all. But this does not of itself increase the student's power if the assessment criteria against which the learning is going to be assessed are not explicit to the student. Insofar as these are 'invisible', the student may even be 'worse off'.

Within the SOMUL project, it was Bernstein's notion of 'boundary' that was employed initially as part of the criteria for the selection of the project's 15 cases. We were interested in the *strength* of boundaries as well as their *location*. In particular, we were interested in the extent to which university curricula were 'closed' to students – i.e. choices limited and restricted to the boundaries of a single discipline – or were 'open' in the sense that students had plenty of choice, both within and beyond the boundaries of a single discipline.

Applied to the concerns of the SOMUL project, Bernstein's concepts seem to us to suggest a number of hypotheses that we hope our empirical work will begin to test. These include the following:

- (i) where the subject is strongly classified within the institution, there will be a stronger perception of differences and powerful subject-based identities; these are possessed by the staff and available

to be acquired by the students

- (ii) weak framing gives learners greater opportunities to validate their knowledge – and demonstrate learning achievements
- (iii) but weak framing also weakens the classification and therefore the strength of the identities that can be acquired in the context
- (iv) where framing is weak, widening participation students may struggle to find the 'recognition' and 'realisation' rules to learn what they are meant to learn
- (v) change in classification and framing will reflect changes in the power relations affecting the learning context – e.g. subject benchmarks, generic pedagogic training of lecturers, employability initiatives all reflect external interests that require change in classification and framing strengths if they are to be successfully implemented
- (vi) classification and framing could also be applied to the student's world outside higher education; what are the boundary strengths between university and home and work? Can out-of-class experiences be subjected to strong framing? (as perhaps in some forms of Personal Development Planning?)

Although we were initially attempting to apply Bernstein's concepts to distinguish between learning settings within the project's three focus subjects of biochemistry, business studies and sociology, we recognised that it was possible to apply them to the subjects themselves and also to students' engagement in their studies. At the subject level, admission rules and the strength of identity and loyalty to the subject differ to some extent irrespective of institutional context. At the student level, circumstances of study – accommodation, domestic or work commitments – produce boundaries of different kinds and strengths.

Operationalising the concept of organisational mediation

In each of the three subjects, it was intended to select programmes of study that provided examples of both specialist (closed) and combined/modular (open) curricula and of different modes of study (full-time and part-time). The key concern was with boundary strength – boundaries between the different parts of the curriculum and between ‘university knowledge’ and external or everyday knowledge. This was to be our rough operationalisation of ‘organisational mediation’. (An equally rough operationalisation of social mediation was to be based on the relative homogeneity/heterogeneity of the student group.)

However, this classification encountered some difficulties in application. First, rapidly shifting patterns of disciplinary knowledge and changing principles of course organisation appear to be creating more complex and often looser curricular offerings within institutions. Boundaries still exist (i.e. constraints and rules about what can be studied) but they are often not clear-cut or coterminous with established disciplinary and organisational structures. Second, there appears to exist some degree of correlation between the principles of course organisation and the social mix of the student intakes, thus potentially confounding the measurement of these variables.

What has become clear in looking at the organisation of the project’s three subjects in different universities is that curriculum organisation itself must be related to other organisational factors: how academic staff are themselves grouped and organised; how students are grouped and organised; how space and time are arranged and organised. We are finding that these factors can vary independently of each other. There are also factors associated with the larger environment of the host university – its size, location, reputation, research emphasis – that must be taken into account. What students learn, we contend, may differ according to these factors. We are attempting to explore these systematically in each of our 15 case studies.

How academic staff are organised

We have been looking at a number of factors. Basic is the question of whether there is an organisational unit (department/school) exclusive to the subject or whether it is shared with other subjects. If the latter, we are interested in which subjects are co-located, how they are related to each other, and the relative strength/size of the focus subject within the unit. Our conjecture here is that organisational ‘apartness’ will be conducive to the generation and support of a strong subject identity and loyalty, at least among the staff.

However, we found that our initial questions about organisational units were too limited. As well as asking ‘is there a separate department of X?’ we found we also had to ask ‘and has there ever been a separate department of X?’ Organisational cultures and practices continue to exist long after the organisational forms that gave rise to them have disappeared.

A further aspect of the staff subject group in which we are interested is its reputation and resource strength (and also the strengths of any larger organisational units of which it is a part). One of our case studies displays the names of its two Nobel Prize winners at the entrance to the department. In other cases, students find themselves being invited to read books written by their own lecturers. Subject groups are also differentially equipped with both staff and non-staff resources. This affects not only how student learning can be supported but also student perceptions of the status and importance of the place where they are studying, and hence perhaps their perceptions of their own status and importance.

A related point is the balance of emphasis placed on teaching and research within the subject group (and the balance between undergraduate and postgraduate teaching). We recognise that this is a complex issue in its own right and that it is part of a larger issue of ‘subject culture’ within a particular institution.

The organisation of staffing is clearly linked to the organisation of the curriculum and notions of boundary and of classification and framing can again be applied.

How students are organised

Again closely related to curriculum organisation, the ways in which undergraduate students are organised within an institution will be crucially important to the relationships and interactions that are established between students and between students and academic staff. Issues of control arise. Who 'admits' students – to the institution, to the subject, to an individual module? Who sets requirements on matters such as attendance and assessment? How are support services organised and how do students gain access to them? Who sets limits to module choices available to students? Are there organisational groupings of students which run counter to subject-based groupings, for example college membership, halls of residence?

These are all issues that will influence the extent to which student life is lived 'within the subject', the extent to which loyalties and identities are generated in relation to the subject or to other objects available in the institutional setting – for example, the institution itself or to sports or societies. It is again a matter of boundaries, of the relative insulation of student lives within an institution and of who exercises control over what goes on within those boundaries.

How space and time are organised

Another boundary issue concerns the organisation of physical space. Is there an identifiable physical space for the subject within the institution and what goes on within it? For example, in most places, academic staff will be accommodated in rooms fairly adjacent to each other. But will teaching take place there? And is the subject's space clearly separated from spaces devoted to other activities? A separate corridor? A separate floor? A separate building? A separate campus? Does the space have its own facilities – a coffee bar, IT facilities, laboratories – or are these shared with others? Again, we have a question of lives (staff and students) lived together or lived apart and the opportunities thus provided for the existence of shared cultures. We also have possible issues of status and importance that may be related to the 'quality' of space – both absolute and relative to other spaces in the institution. These may send out

messages to both staff and students about their relative worth and importance within the institution and perhaps outside it as well.

From the perspective of the individual student, more or less time will be spent in the 'subject space'. This will be a function not only of what goes on in the space (its relationship to other organisational factors) but of other aspects of the student's life at university. Here again, organisational and social mediation combine in framing the student experience.

Turning to the organisation of time, this is not just about teaching timetables, although these are important. If, for example, a student's timetable only requires attendance at the university on three days a week, the student can more easily take a part-time job or otherwise absent him- or herself from the university environment. We know from other studies we have undertaken (e.g. Brennan and Shah, 2003) that many students on supposedly full-time courses are effectively studying part-time. We also know that universities can make such study patterns more or less likely according to the requirements that they place on students with regard to the use of time.

A further dimension to the organisation of time is whether study is done on a shared/collective basis or on a unique/individual basis. Does a group of students 'share' a timetable? Or do students move as individuals between classes according to a timetable and a script which is unique to them? In the former case, students will find themselves meeting the same group of students in all or most of the lectures and classes they attend. In the latter, they may find themselves spending much of their time among 'strangers'.

The work of Jan Nespors (1994) is particularly relevant to linking space, time and the curriculum within a comprehensive model of how students learn within particular fields of knowledge. In his work, physics and management programmes have been used as 'points of entry' that give access to the larger processes that constitute and reproduce disciplines. Those processes centre on the incorporation of students into discipline-specific temporal and spatial organisation of knowledge. Nespors argues

that face-to-face interaction in specific situations is never just that but is a mechanism through which students to a greater or lesser degree become enrolled in an actor-network that connects them to a disciplinary network. He is concerned with how people move into fields of practice understood as organisations and ways of producing activities, spaces, and times. Social life (and the life of students) in an actor network is both space-forming and space-contingent.

Disciplinary power, in these terms, is about the production of *space-contingent* social life at the expense of *space-forming* social practice. In Nespor's analysis, physics and management are space-contingent fields of practice and differ from programmes such as those in the liberal arts. This difference is manifested in their *localisation* in specific regions of a campus defined by particular buildings, classrooms, and corridors and their use of *organisational guidelines* (e.g., course-taking requirements) 'to channel students, faculty, and textbooks into those regions and exclude students from other programs'. In his work it was in physics that localisation was most extreme, with the subject being physically enclosed in particular spaces and socially compressed as it increasingly monopolised the students' time.

By contrast, in a discipline such as management, while boundaries existed (the Business School), these were more inclusive spaces shared with cognate disciplines such as accounting and finance, and the range of settings was greater, including classrooms, cafeterias, study halls and interview rooms. By comparison with physics, management students engaged in more diverse activities, many outside management, and their time was more fragmented within and across courses.

Nespor also deals with 'space-forming' and this part of his dialectic refers to the agency that students exert on programmes. He describes that even in physics, the discipline so demanding on students' time and space, some students creatively and in a response to the pressure of the discipline took over classrooms and corridors late at night for their own as against the department's use. More fundamentally, 'space-forming' might also refer to those mechanisms that challenge

constructions of what constitutes knowledge at the higher education level and the means by which knowledge can be acquired and demonstrated, such as the recognition and accreditation of prior (experiential) learning, and programmes of independent study, with to quote Percy and Ramsden (1980, p.15) 'its stress on weakened boundaries between subject areas, on supra-disciplinary concepts, and on student control over the way in which knowledge is transmitted'. Echoes of Bernstein's notions of classification and framing are immediately obvious.

Today's rhetoric of higher education institutions suggests in many cases an orientation towards space-forming, with an emphasis on flexibility through modularity and credit accumulation and transfer systems. However, we know little about the extent to which these are a real reflection of student demand and the implications that these forms of flexibility have for learning. Nor do we have a real sense of how students form space and time in systems, what factors determine paths taken or the extent to which choice is operationalised. One of the areas for exploration in SOMUL will be the extent to which students exert agency within particular organisational structures, and the extent to which that is permitted by organisational practice.

'Open' and 'closed' learning

It should be clear from the above discussion that we believe that organisational factors concerned with curriculum, staffing, students, space and time are linked, although not in pre-determined ways. Similarly, there are links between organisational and social factors but with influences going in both directions.

In examining the organisational properties of the project's 15 case studies, we are attempting to describe them in relation to these five areas of curriculum, staffing, students, space and time. In each area, we are interested in boundary strengths and have employed an admittedly rather crude open/closed dichotomy in distinguishing them. Thus, in principle, we might find a case study site characterised by subject-based 'closure' in respect of all five factors. We might anticipate that such a site would be likely to generate strong subject identities and loyalties among both its staff and students.

These would be important learning outcomes in themselves but might also be expected to relate to outcomes in relation to curriculum knowledge and skills. Conversely, a site characterised by 'openness' in all the above respects might reveal less by way of subject-based identities, loyalties and related knowledge outcomes. It might, however, reveal rather more in terms of learning outcomes related to the ability to make connections, flexibility, tolerance, independence and so on. A difference that one might rather provocatively state as that between closed and open minds!

The above discussion of organisational factors that potentially influence student learning has concentrated on the course or subject level. While this is the level closest to the student experience, it is also necessary to take into account 'higher level' organisational features of institutions.

'Higher level' organisational factors

Even where subject insulation is strong, wider institutional concerns and external constraints will undoubtedly impinge on practice. For example, quality assurance mechanisms, widening participation imperatives and the Research Assessment Exercise are part of today's environment across all of higher education. Each is part of the wider organisational context in which university departments and subject groups operate, and the strength and nature of central management of institutions will determine the extent to which teaching and learning are prioritised in relation to these and other imperatives, and the way in which they should be organised to accommodate a diverse student body. Institutional differences in these and other respects are likely to be related to institutional positioning within an increasingly differentiated and stratified higher education system.

Bourgeois *et al* (2001) have summarised some of the literature that characterises universities as organisations. They suggest that a university has most of the features of a 'professional bureaucracy'. However, they suggest that universities also have specific characteristics that distinguish them among other types of professional bureaucracy.

From their analysis they identify the university as an organisation with a high potential for conflict, and use this as a basis for an analysis of the university's behaviours in respect to adult access and participation. They identify four areas of conflict:

Conflict among the multiple and ambiguous roles and missions the university is supposed to carry out in a society that increases its demands, expectations and pressure upon it.

Conflict between the social necessity of those missions and the need to achieve the 'system' goals of survival, competitiveness and growth in a context of continuously declining resources and increasing costs.

Conflict among the academics who do not form a single professional body as in other professional organisations, but look more like a fragmented collection of quasi-autonomous clusters, tribes and territories, with their own goals, technologies, interests and sub-cultures.

Conflict between the professionals doing their job in the classrooms and laboratories on the one hand and an administration and top management, on the other, which grows in size, power and presence in trying to ensure the overall co-ordination needed to overcome the risk of disintegration resulting from faculty fragmentation.

(Bourgeois *et al*, 2001)

Other organisational models of universities can be found in the literature which place different degrees of emphasis on the role of conflict. Drawing on the classic texts of Baldrige (1983) and Cohen and March (1991), we can identify the following four models of university organisation. These are best considered as ideal rather than empirical types but they do alert us to a range of ways in which academic institutions can differ from each other.

- (i) The 'Collegial' model emphasises consensus on shared responsibilities, open minds and mutual respect, time and opportunity for discussion and shared norms.

- (ii) The 'Bureaucratic' model emphasises the increase in specialist sub-units, more complex administrative structures, clear roles/offices and division of labour, systematised routines, top down implementation, stability and fairness and is generally not seen as suited to the complex and the novel.
- (iii) The 'Political' model emphasises conflict resolution, pluralism, diversity of interests and highly visible decision-making.
- (iv) 'Organised Anarchy' suggests 'that things just happen', 'ambiguity', and is common in 'specialised and fragmented organisations'. It has sometimes been described as a 'garbage can' approach where problems are 'disposed of' rather than solved (Cohen & March, op cit).

How different universities manage decision-making at the institutional level has major implications for such matters as the implementation of subject benchmarks or other aspects of quality assurance arrangements; for the balance between teaching, research and other university functions; for the incentive structures for both academic and administrative staff; and for much more. The institutional level of organisational analysis is important to the way in which we conceptualise mediation. For all the influences of disciplines and the boundaries that they create, the strength of external constraints and accountability has become greater in the modern university. External influences are themselves mediated by organisational characteristics at the institutional level. The relative influence on organisational behaviour of these supra-institutional factors and those exerted by internal units will be an important feature of our analysis.

Conclusions

The SOMUL project's conceptualisation of 'organisational mediation' is work in progress. The conceptualisation with which the project commenced has itself been 'mediated', both

by the fieldwork experiences and by our further reading and debate. It will continue to evolve as the project attempts to confront the increasing diversity of organisational forms in higher education and to identify the extent and the ways in which these impact on what is learned.

Methodologically, the project has to address a complex interaction of variables, including those we have termed 'organisational' and those we have termed 'social'. It seems possible that patterns in one might reinforce patterns in the other. It is also possible that patterns in one might actually disguise patterns in the other, for example by failing to assign personal recognition and status to graduates in institutions that may be deficient in these attributes themselves. The project will also need to consider those attributes of organisational and student culture that are a creation of current actors – both staff and students – and those that represent a given consequence of structural and organisational arrangements and/or of institutional histories.

Organisational mediation is ultimately about power, whether it is exercised inside or outside the institution. Within the institution, it is about the balance of power between the centre and the basic academic units and about the balance of power between academics, managers and students. The exercise of such power is in part about changing 'what is learned at university'.

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