Working Paper 5
August 2009

Key findings

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

The working paper draws on research undertaken in fifteen departments in different universities in order to report some key findings on how the different diversities in UK higher education – of universities, of students and of what students learn while at university – are and are not related to each other.

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

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

PROJECT AIM AND SUMMARY

The aim of the project was to:

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

In summary it was exploring the relationships between:

conceptions of learning outcomes:

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

ways in which learning is mediated:

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

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

• Biochemistry
• Business Studies
• Sociology

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

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

Previous working papers in the series are:

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

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

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

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

Working Paper 6 will focus on the implications for policy and practice in higher education.

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

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

by John Brennan, Mike Osborne and Tarla Shah

INTRODUCTION

When considering entry into higher education, the two key decisions that potential students must make are what to study and where to study it. The decision on 'where' to study is of course constrained by, amongst other things, the student's qualifications matched against the entry requirements of different universities. The decision is also now increasingly being informed by public information – often in league table form – on the supposed strengths and weaknesses of different universities and the different study programmes within them. More than most other higher education systems, higher education in the UK is very stratified, with differences seen mainly in hierarchical terms. But how important are these differences for the outcomes of learning for individual students?

Expanded systems of higher education are generally differentiated ones, in terms of their functions, their institutions and their programmes, and the populations they serve. Teichler has recently made a distinction between 'horizontal' and 'vertical' forms of differentiation. The former emphasises functional differences (programme types, subjects covered, links with industry) and the latter reputational and prestige differences ('top-ranking', 'world class' and the like) (Teichler 2007).

UK higher education fits many of the features of Teichler's 'vertical' form of differentiation with strong reputational distinctions between institutions. Unlike most continental European systems of higher education, in the UK it is relatively more important 'where' you study

than 'what' you study (Brennan 2008). The UK higher education system has become increasingly vertically differentiated with different sets of institutions playing distinctive roles (see Osborne 2005). Yet more important than any functional divisions is the hierarchical division in which participation in the elite end of higher education is regarded as bestowing all sorts of advantages, both in the student experience and in life opportunities following graduation. However, there is a real question of how well reputational differences between institutions relate to real differences in the experiences of their students and whether differences in life opportunities reflect real differences in learning achievements (meritocracy) or merely differences in social capital and other largely inherited attributes.

The differentiation of UK higher education can be linked to increasing diversity within the student population. The rhetoric of widening participation in higher education for groups disadvantaged by virtue of their socio-economic background, race, gender and a range of other personal and situational characteristics, has been a prominent driver for national policy within the UK during recent decades.

The increasing diversity of UK higher education and how this impacts on the student experience has been central to the SOMUL project which has explored the relationships between three kinds of diversity – of universities, of students, and of what students learn while at university. While there are official statements about what students are supposed to learn (benchmark statements, programmes specifications), and unofficial perceptions about the 'best' and the 'worst' places

to learn it, there is limited evidence about what different kinds of students learn at different kinds of university. This is the evidence gap that the project attempted to fill.

The expansion and diversification of higher education raises questions about the comparability of the experiences, learning and credentials available across a complex and differentiated higher education system. We have been asking 'what is learned at university?' at a time when higher education in the UK comprises many different kinds of universities, different kinds of courses, and students from different backgrounds (both educational and social) studying in very different circumstances and at different stages in their lives. This is what is meant by 'social and organisational mediation' in the project's title. How is learning affected by the way courses are organised, by the places in which it is taking place, by the people students are learning alongside, by the reasons people have for studying and by the other things that are going on in their lives whilst they are studying?

While the increasing diversity of the student experience in UK higher education cannot be denied, the significance attached to many aspects of this diversity is open to question. We have found that most students attach considerable importance to friendships they form and to the confidence they believe they have acquired whilst at university. Commitment to the subject of study is important, but less so than the more social aspects of university life. The exceptions to this pattern are provided by students, especially mature students, who tend to live at home and have little time to spare for the non-academic aspects of higher education. 'Where' one studies does appear to matter but largely in terms of what it implies about the student's life outside university than because of major differences between the student experiences at different universities.

THE SOMUL RESEARCH

The SOMUL project involved fieldwork in 15 case study universities - five cases each for biosciences, business studies and sociology. Students from these programmes were investigated by means of questionnaires and face to face interviews (both at individual level and in focus groups) at various stages during and after their undergraduate careers. Over 1600 questionnaires were completed by students and over 280 students were involved in the interviews. Interviews were also undertaken with staff at the 15 case study institutions – nearly 60 staff were interviewed. A wider survey of third year students in the existing three subjects and six additional subjects (computing, electrical engineering, film and media, geography, history and mathematics) within the original institutions plus one additional institution was undertaken in the final year of the project to assess the general applicability of the case study findings. Over 600 students completed the wider survey questionnaire.

CONTEXTS FOR STUDENT LEARNING

In considering how different forms of institutional diversity combine with different forms of student diversity to help shape the student experience, the project developed a simple typology based on two dimensions of the diversity of the student population on a particular course or study programme and the extent to which the student experience was a shared one. The latter dimension was intended to reflect a wide range of organisational and social factors which determined the kinds and strengths of relationships formed at university, the nature of the engagement of individual students with the life of the university, and the strength of any shared or collective identity among students. Figure 1 suggests three types of contexts for student learning arising from these dimensions.

Figure 1: Three types of contexts for student learning

	Shared	Student Experience	Individual-ised
High	A		
Student Diversity		C	
Low	B		

In a Type A context, a diverse group of students come together to share a largely common experience during their time at university. This provides opportunities for 'learning from difference' and might be linked to the promotion of greater 'social integration and cohesion'. In a sense, it exemplifies the 'promise' of widening participation but set within the conventional setting of a shared and largely 'collegial' experience of study.

In a Type B context – the so-called 'traditional' context of higher education in the UK – broadly similar kinds of students come together to share a largely common experience. This might imply the 'maintenance of existing differences', of 'reinforcement of existing identities', the promotion of 'status confirmation and legitimisation'. It reflects the residential tradition of UK higher education and is most commonly associated with its more elite forms.

Finally, in a Type C context, students have only limited contact with other students, thus the diversity of the group is not particularly significant. These are the students who typically have demanding outside commitments, whether domestic or employment-related. Their time for study is limited and even more so is their time for other aspects of university life. For such students, university may be more about 'living with difference', about 'maintaining and constructing multiple identities' – at university, at home, at work. We have described the experiences of these students as individualised rather than shared, where university is not a place for the acquisition of new friendships, where time on campus is limited, and where university is about

study and credentials rather than the larger socialisation claims made traditionally for the university experience.

It is of course possible for individual students to have, say, a Type C experience in a Type B setting but, for the purposes of our analysis, we identified a dominant form of student experience in each of the project's 15 case studies. We had three examples of Type A, eight examples of Type B and four examples of Type C. In looking at the different aspects of the student experience across these three types, we found both commonalities and differences.

SOME KEY FINDINGS

In investigating whether different things are learned in these different types of learning context, we have taken a wide view of learning to embrace the academic and the non-academic, the personal and the social.

DIVERSE PERCEPTIONS OF STUDENTS AND STAFF

Using the questionnaire and interview data, we have analysed students' own perceptions of the outcomes of their higher education experience. Findings from the questionnaire data are summarised in Table 1, first in terms of differences between the three types of learning setting we have described above and then in terms of the three different subject fields. We have found considerable commonalities as well as some clear differences between students in different institutional settings and subject areas. The commonalities included the high importance attached to outcomes connected with personal confidence and social networks. Both tended to receive greater emphasis than purely academic outcomes. A commitment to a subject and the development of an academic identity remained relatively low compared with other features of higher education, irrespective of the case type. And commitment to their university was extremely high only for students in the Type B cases.

There were also some important differences in what students themselves reported from the three different types of student experience. Those in a Type C setting differed from the others in a number of respects. They reported lower gains in self-confidence and they were less likely to expect to retain university friendships after graduation. They were more likely to feel that they 'never fitted in' and very much more likely to feel that the 'qualification was the main thing' and that life outside of university remained the more important aspect of their lives. They were, however, compared with other graduates, rather more likely to believe that they had a clearer view of the future than when they commenced their course.

Students who had been in a Type B setting were massively more likely to want to retain an association with their university and were also more likely to feel they were able to get on with a range of people. And they were much more likely to emphasise the 'life changing' nature of the university experience. Whilst students within a Type A setting were broadly similar to students in a Type B setting, they were somewhat more likely to show a continuing commitment to their subjects and rather less likely to feel that university had changed the way they saw the world.

To illustrate the points being made above, we have drawn out some quotes from the students that we interviewed, below.

'You learn the skill of you know … not to take things on face value. It teaches you to look from every angle. You know … consider that point that you wouldn't have done before, consider that. Especially with my degree it's about community and people. It just teaches you to look at things - don't take things on face value. Why somebody lives their life that way. It just teaches you to look deeply and think a little bit more as to why things happen as they do.'
— *Wendy, Type A setting*

'I've met some wonderful, wonderful people who are so different and diverse. Different outlook on life, different social backgrounds, different sort of aspirations in life. I think you know just being with them obviously changed you as a person. Members of just the department itself you know sort of give you a different appreciation of what sort of life you want and what you want out of it – but I definitely think people are sort of very important.'
— *Catherine, Type B setting*

'The whole package of discovering in detail the ins and outs of a subject is fascinating whilst growing as a person, i.e. living away from home, maturing and meeting such a wide variety of new people, some of which turn out to become life long friends (hopefully!)… I think I find it easier to meet new people and get on with them and also like living with different people… I'd probably just say like it's developing me as a person. Like I think if I hadn't come, say like some of my friends way back from Hull that did go straight into work from A-levels, and if I'd kind of stayed at home and might still be living with parents and things, I think I have definitely developed as a person, so I'm more rounded and I've had that experience of kind of living out of, you know, another city, away from parents.'
— *Samir, Type B setting*

'I would say I learned to work independently. And I learned to find connections between different topics. And I learned to make decisions and what other possibilities what we have. And I learned to work on a structured way maybe. Like you must start with a little step and then you can go on.'
—*Babett, Type C setting*

'Um. What have I learned? Just basic management and business methods, procedures, policies. The lot. But what else have I learned is I've also improved on my time management and skills such as presentation skills. And writing skills. And organising – not just my time but working along with people and organising tasks'.
— *Abby, Type C setting*

Table 1: Students' perceptions of how they had changed while at university by type of learning setting and by subject field (% of students that 'Agree for the most part' or 'Agree entirely' that they have changed)

	Type of learning setting		
	A	B	C
I now have a much clearer view of what I want to do in the future	47	46	53
I am a much more self-confident person than the person I was when I came here	72	74	62
I feel that I no longer have much in common with friends outside of university	19	17	14
I am very committed to the subjects I've studied here and would like to continue to read/study them in the future	52	47	45
I can't imagine losing touch with some of the friends I've made here	72	70	46
I would like to remain associated with the university in some way	28	88	23
My time at university has really changed the way I see the world	41	55	52
My life outside university remains the most important to me	40	42	69
I feel that I am now able to get on with a much wider range of people	67	78	67
I never really fitted in here. I'll be quite glad to leave	9	6	14

	Subject field		
	Business Studies	Biosciences	Sociology
I now have a much clearer view of what I want to do in the future	50	52	45
I am a much more self-confident person than the person I was when I came here	68	69	63
I feel that I no longer have much in common with friends outside of university	18	27	20
I am very committed to the subjects I've studied here and would like to continue to read/study them in the future	32	62	54
I can't imagine losing touch with some of the friends I've made here	60	68	57
I would like to remain associated with the university in some way	26	44	29
My time at university has really changed the way I see the world	48	52	58
My life outside university remains the most important to me	55	35	46
I feel that I am now able to get on with a much wider range of people	70	65	68
I never really fitted in here. I'll be quite glad to leave	7	6	10

The key characteristic that was mentioned by the staff interviewed from all three subjects and across all three types of setting was a greater instrumentalism among students. However, this was manifested in a number of different ways and staff were not always referring to the same sorts of behaviours. We can report some subject differences. Academics in business studies, alone amongst our disciplines, attribute the instrumentalism to the subject's inner identity. Further, this is the only subject where instrumentalism is perceived to increase during the three years of study, a perception corroborated by our questionnaire data from students, and one not found in similar data gathered from sociology and biosciences students. Instrumentalism was also linked by academics in sociology and business studies with the socio-economic environment experienced by their students, who by comparison to those in biosciences are from poorer backgrounds and often struggle financially. Even among the comparatively better off bioscience students, there is still a perception of a narrow instrumentality that has a financial base linked to getting 'value for money' given that they are paying fees. It is also associated with a minimalist approach to study, a lack of enquiring spirit, and, to a certain extent, to the narrow professional objectives of programmes with strong vocational orientations.

Whilst there certainly were concerns expressed by academics about instrumentality and the lack of subject identity, as we have pointed out, the historical power and significance of academic subjects to students in UK higher education may have been overstated. Although we observed in certain instances relatively weak student identity with the subjects they were studying, there may be positive connotations of this phenomenon linked to curriculum flexibility and an openness to different forms of knowledge and inquiry. Further, for most students in our three subjects, the subject remained important, in particular in their choice of institution. The views expressed by staff may be in part an expression of their own atypical biographies of keen and committed students, so committed that they never left higher education!

STUDENTS' APPROACHES TO LEARNING AND THEIR PERSONAL DEVELOPMENT

Turning to the academic side of student life, to the different approaches to study and learning, we found some interesting differences and some important commonalities between students studying different things in different places.

For example, there was no significant difference amongst students across the three subjects in their scores on questionnaire items related to the 'construction of knowledge' though there were differences in relation to 'intake of knowledge and use of knowledge'. There were also no significant differences found in the students' scores on the use of 'deep' or 'surface' approaches to learning across subjects. In terms of personal and educational developments, there were not significant differences in students' scores on 'self-organisation' or 'social skills', but there were subject differences in 'cognitive skills' and 'mathematical skills' in different disciplines.

Applying the Type A, B and C learning contexts to the data gathered from the surveys, we found differences in approaches to learning between the three types of setting but these differences were, once again, relatively small.

STUDENT DIFFERENCES AND 'PARALLEL UNIVERSITIES' – DIVERSITIES OR HIERARCHIES?

Reputational differences between universities are important to students. There is greater demand for places on the courses at institutions with the strongest reputations, and their graduates tend to enjoy significant career advantages. But it is not self-evident that their students necessarily learn more or different things while at university. Within the SOMUL project, we have attempted to understand the diversities of higher education in the UK without recourse to the hierarchical discourses concerned with 'top', 'pre-92', 'post 92', 'world class' terminologies. We have explored higher education's diversity in terms of the student

experience and the outcomes for learning that derive from it. We must now consider the extent to which diversities of the latter sort map onto diversities of the former hierarchical sort.

We can group the elements of diversity in the student experience in terms of the characteristics of subjects of study, the way these studies are organised, the characteristics and backgrounds of the students and the different forms of student engagements and orientations. We can also consider the different elements of the student experience in terms of time spent studying; time spent on other university activities; and time spent outside of the university.

On the first of these – time spent studying – there are subject differences (with laboratory-based bioscience students spending the highest number of hours) but otherwise there seem to be no large differences between students or between institutions. The main difference between students and institutions is seen in the time devoted to other university activities. Here, there appears to be a significant trade-off for students with external commitments and a lot of time spent on them. For these students, the experience of higher education is a largely 'individualised' one. They have neither time – nor perhaps inclination – to spend time in university bars or at university societies. They have busy lives off campus and time spent at university is almost entirely devoted to study-related activities. Such students are most likely to be found in what we have termed Type C higher education settings. In turn, these settings seem most likely to be found within post-92 universities, catering for mature students and others who have followed less conventional routes into higher education. These universities are also less likely to possess the facilities to provide an attractive university social life. Another reason, therefore, for spending more time off-campus is that there are fewer things to do 'on campus'. This is exemplified well in the quote below made by Linda, a student we interviewed from a post-92, Type C higher education setting:

'Yeah, it has been hard. I wouldn't you know say it's been easy in any way, shape or form. But then I enjoy coming here. I will miss that. Coming here every week. I won't miss having to do the work at home and trying to fit it in! … maybe if I had done it when I was younger when I didn't have family commitments and you know, like parents getting older and I had been a bit more kind of ambitious and done something else with it. But I don't know. At the moment I just feel like I need a break from it for a while just to kind of recover my state of mind. And then I think, perhaps when my little boy is a bit older then I might think more about a career for myself.'

In contrast, we find that many students experiencing our Type B settings – overwhelmingly within pre-92 universities – devote considerable amounts of time and attach significant importance to the non-academic side of university life. For these students, the new friends made and the new institutional loyalties developed represent the most important achievements of university life. Thus, for students in the upper reaches of the university hierarchies in the UK, it may be the acquisition of social capital and the institutional 'brand' which distinguishes them from their fellows who attend 'less advantaged' institutions. It may also be the case that there is likely to be more 'fun' to be had at the former institutions, especially for the young and unattached. One of the students we interviewed from a pre-92, Type B setting, said:

'It's definitely not the academic. Well not just the academic. You know, it is about getting a degree in the end. But I suppose in the Third Year it is more about the academic side of it, but the rest is, you know, First and Second Year isn't so much about the academic-ness, it's about being able to get on with people, leaving home, being independent. I don't' think it really hit me until after I'd left home that I wouldn't actually be going home properly again in the same way as when I was doing my A-levels or whatever. So yes I think it is about making the transition into the real world.'
— Elizabeth

In terms of the academic side of university life, we find considerable commonalities within

particular subjects, irrespective of the institutions attended. Academic content is determined more by the values of the subject 'tribe' than by the status of the institution attended. There are some diversities within approaches and orientations to study, but these follow subject and student characteristics rather than the reputational hierarchies of institutions.

We might conclude, therefore, that institutional hierarchies are important when higher education is performing its external social selection function. It does matter where you study in terms of the social and economic value attached to your credentials. But in terms of the broader socialisation functions of higher education, diversity 'cuts' in different ways. Thus the experience of higher education will be different according to the stage of the life course in which it is occurring, the external commitments of the individual student, the subject being studied and how the studies are organised by the particular university. It is not possible to reduce these diversities to a simple hierarchy of universities, although hierarchy and diversity are not completely disassociated. There are some universities still mainly catering for young school leavers and helping them to 'grow up'. And these tend to be the older and more prestigious universities. Typically, the students are living away from home for the first time. Then there are other universities catering for more local students, with a wider range of ages and backgrounds, and for whom university is mostly associated with academic study and gaining a qualification. In a real sense, these universities are catering for students who are looking for different things – in terms both of experiences and outcomes.

We found in some of our case studies that it was more accurate to speak about *parallel universities*, where within one institution there were two broadly distinct groups of students, reflecting the differences referred to above, and each receiving quite different student experiences. While there may be a tendency for one to be regarded as superior to the other by outsiders, that is not

necessarily how it appears on the ground. And those institutions which are the most successful in offering 'parallel universities' are probably the ones who accord equivalent respect and attention to each of them. In some institutions the primary distinction is between the experience of the commuting and the residential student. In one of the case study institutions, there was a separate 'widening participation' campus where the staff from the main campus taught the same syllabus differently, but with the same outcomes ostensibly. However, there was little interaction between students on the two campuses. And whilst academic outcomes appeared to be largely the same, the other aspects of learning, in particular those linked to identity formation and related social capital attributes, were quite different.

These contrasting experiences are demonstrated by the views expressed by two students we interviewed from one of our case study institutions which can be classified as a *'parallel'* university. The first is from Linda who was a mature student with external commitments such as family and employment and who specifically attended university for academic purposes. Therefore, the degree influenced what she has gained from the experience.

'That it's really opened my eyes, because before you just go to work, do your job, come home. I've kind of like realised all these subtle things that they're doing with the HR. The subtle side of things. They're actually not as nice for us. Yeah, I've learnt some IT stuff since I've been here. One of the modules was IT based and although I had used sort of basic spreadsheet training and things like that, I've learned a lot of new formulas and sort of things. Yeah, it has been hard. I wouldn't you know say it's been easy in any way, shape or form.'

In comparison, Roberto was a younger student who moved away from home for the first time and felt he had changed due to the new environment rather than the degree or academic reasons:

'I've definitely changed but I don't know if the change came because I am doing my degree. I think it's more

because of the people and the new environment you get and so you change. I don't think it is because of the degree. Mmm. It was more like a gradual improvement but it was. The big change could have been the beginning when we arrived here. Because we didn't know anything so we were not sure if we were really accepted.'

IMPLICATIONS

The sixth and final Working Paper is this series will look in some detail at the implications of the SOMUL research for the ways in which learning and teaching are organised in universities in the UK. Below, we highlight some of the issues posed for those who study or work in universities or who seek to recruit the products of these institutions. Common to all of them is a set of challenges to all who uncritically accept a reputational hierarchy as being the key to the understanding of the effects and consequences of increasing diversity. The SOMUL study identified many commonalities in the experiences and outcomes of university study, irrespective of where and what one studies. Where differences have been found to exist, they are not necessarily always due to reputational hierarchies.

IMPLICATIONS FOR STUDENTS

This, therefore, means that intending students need to be given clearer guidance in working out their personal objectives and preferences and to help them seek a good match between these and what is on offer at particular higher education institutions. They should not merely seek the 'best' place to which their exam results will give them access.

IMPLICATIONS FOR UNIVERSITIES

Individual universities and other higher education institutions need to be clearer about the particular kinds of student backgrounds, lifestyles and objectives that can be catered for within the institution. They should recognise that different kinds of students will need different things. Attention should be given, in particular, to:

• forms of curriculum organisation, including the amount and kinds of choices available, the advice and information to be provided on these choices and the larger social, organisational and spatial implications of these choices;

• whether and how to try to target different kinds of curriculum and pedagogic offerings to different kinds of students;

• what other forms of support, formal and informal, need to be provided to meet the needs of diverse groups of students;

• ensuring that the assessment and certification of learning recognise a wide and diverse range of learning outcomes.

IMPLICATIONS FOR EMPLOYERS

Employers and others concerned with the qualities of university graduates need to recognise both what undergraduate studies have in common and how they vary. They should resist the temptation to ascribe simple stratified and hierarchical notions to the rich and complex outcomes of university study.

IMPLICATIONS FOR GOVERNMENT AND NATIONAL AGENCIES

A number of potential challenges to current policies and thinking of government and national agencies have been posed by the student voices which emerged in the course of the project. These challenges include:

• The current employability and skills agenda of government may not be fully shared by students. An exclusive focus on employability and skills could lead to a neglect of equally important ways in which higher education

may change people's lives and impact upon the communities in which they live.

• Whilst the conceptions of learning outcomes as expressed in subject benchmark statements were broadly endorsed by the students who took part in the study, they failed, however, to tell the whole story of what is learned at university.

• The dominant hierarchical conception of diversity in UK higher education in policy discourses provides only a very limited reflection of the diversities that exist, and neglects the commonalities that can be found.

• The student experience is a part-time one for most students. This should be recognised, as should the opportunities that this can provide for a wider range of learning outcomes, both employment-related and in person development.

CONCLUDING COMMENTS

As we have already mentioned, the above are some of the preliminary findings arising from early analyses of the vast array of data available from the project. More detailed analyses and discussion will be available in the forthcoming book to be published by Routledge at the end of 2009. Working Paper 6 in this Academy series will, in particular, focus on the project's implications for policy and practice.

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PROJECT RESEARCH TEAM

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