

# MONOGRAPH

*University life uncovered:  
making sense of the  
student experience*

**The**  
Higher  
Education  
**Academy** **Social Policy  
and Social Work  
(SWAP)**

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# Introduction

## **Rebecca Johnson**

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The papers included in this monograph originated as presentations at *University Life Uncovered: how are students' experiences outside the classroom impacting on their learning?* a conference hosted by the Subject Centre for Social Policy and Social Work (SWAP) in partnership with the Subject Centres for Education (ESCalate) and Sociology, Anthropology and Politics (C-SAP).

*University Life Uncovered* aimed to provide a reflective and critical forum for the growing number of colleagues researching student life during higher education. Professor Miriam David (University of London) and Professor Andy Furlong (University of Glasgow) gave keynote talks offering both a critical perspective on research practices and pedagogies and a focus on socio-economic disadvantage and the university experience. Wes Streeting, Vice President (Education) NUS was the event's guest chair. Paper and poster presentations came from practitioners allied to a wide range of cognate academic subject areas (Sociology, Social Policy, Social Work, Anthropology, Psychology, Education, Culture and Media) as well as student support and related university initiatives. The conference website (including keynotes) can be accessed at: [www.swapexternal.soton.ac.uk/ulu](http://www.swapexternal.soton.ac.uk/ulu).

Several students attended the day and two founding members of the CETL Student Network acted as roving reporters for the conference organisers:

*"...We were able to connect with many of the researchers' experiences of talking to students. Some of the themes that emerged on the day made us both think more about how the social and academic aspects of studentship are inextricably linked. This was a really powerful learning experience and we felt privileged to engage in an academic research community, to learn about different perspectives on students university life from academics and researchers rather than from students themselves".*

*[Linda Graham and Rebecca Freeman]*

A call for papers and review process followed the conference and we are very pleased that the outcomes from that process form the content of the first SWAP monograph. SWAP would like to thank those who attended the conference for making it such a stimulating day and those who submitted monograph papers. We would also like to thank Michael Connolly, chair of the SWAP Steering Group, for writing the foreword.

# A Foreword

**Michael Connolly**

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It has become a truism that Higher Education in the UK – and indeed across much of the developed world – is vastly different compared to 20, 30, never mind 40 years ago. The current Government has frequently articulated its aims to increase the numbers of pupils of school leaving age in Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) and to ensure the diversity of that student body, a policy the current Secretary of State for Innovation, Universities and Skills, John Denham, seems determined to implement despite various criticisms. Recently, for example, Denham announced the government's intention of creating twenty new universities, with the intention of adding to the variety of HEIs in the UK.

One can overstate the degree of homogeneity that existed in universities 40 years ago – the honours class I attended had around twenty students, of whom three were from Malaysia and four or five were mature students. Nonetheless, the then student population represented a relatively small percentage of school leavers, and many of those were ex-grammar school pupils (although a surprising number of these were working class). Few lecturers at the time thought about the relationship between the students sitting in front of them and their pedagogic practice – lectures, seminars and end-of-year examinations were pretty much the standard diet on offer. OHPs and powerpoint handouts were definitely not the currency of the time. Indeed for me the pedagogy of those times was defined by a (very entertaining) lecture at the end of my first term when the massed ranks of the back rows sang lustily and tunelessly Christmas carols, while a determined professor continued to deliver his pre-prepared lecture unheard by any, not even the eager denizens of the front row.

The world has changed. With the onset of mass education have come significant pedagogic changes recognised by (almost) everyone in Higher Education (HE). HEIs vary considerably, though we still maintain the notion (fiction?) that a degree is a degree. But we all surely agree that a student is not a student is not a student. Students' motives, aptitudes, experiences, competences, social skills, familial and other support networks and abilities vary enormously. Furthermore, HEIs – equally – differ enormously. Differences between HEIs are driven in part by the increase in mass education, but are also created by the need to compete for reputation and students in a globalised world and to guarantee financial security. Whilst research outputs continue to define the reputation of many, all HEIs have an ongoing concern with marketing

the specific qualities of the teaching on the courses they offer. We may not all be outstanding researchers – goes the mantra – but there is no excuse for poor teaching from anyone. One is tempted to add “discuss” and invite colleagues to unpack all the implications and assumptions lying behind that statement.

Central to the role of the Subject Centre for Social Policy and Social Work (SWAP) is supporting academics and other staff delivering learning and teaching in departments and related associations and organisations. We work with an interesting and diverse community. Social work has traditionally worried about learning and teaching, driven in part by a profession anxious about those joining it from the halls of academe. So the issue of transferring knowledge to ensure minimum levels of professional competence has always played a part in the world of social work. Credibility within the profession in social work has also been important. Social policy on the other hand usually has been considered a traditional academic discipline, although interestingly social policy modules have always been taught within social work courses. Furthermore, the reach of social policy has been extensive. Some colleagues focus on particular sectors where the range can be wide: from housing to education to health to community work and so forth. Others are concerned about the nature of social policy in a modern capitalist economy, while others worry more about policy development and implementation.

Diversification of subject interests and topics is matched by diversification of the student body. Increasingly, students who sign up for the courses of further study we devise bring with them a diaspora of experiences and expectations of their own. Concurrently certain groups have attracted researchers interested in making sense of the student experience. This SWAP monograph showcases some of the ways in which members of our diverse community are researching the student experience and their findings to date.

The first paper ‘Making sense of student cultures in HE today’ seeks to establish a “framework to examine and explore student experience and its cultures” (including the global). The theme sets the context for the papers that follow. The next three papers are ordered chronologically in terms of the student life cycle. Each extends discussions of ‘individuality’ and ‘group life’ and the impact both have on learning. The last of this set of papers, ‘Living and learning’, also introduces a new way of conceptualising the student experience which includes the discursively powerful ‘slacker’ modality with its associated references to drinking behaviours.

The next two papers offer further interesting insights into the behaviour and attitudes of UK students, as well as the implications of this behaviour for international students, who are a growing and important sub-group within our HEIs. Thus the fifth paper ‘Mindful or mindless’ offers a different perspective on student drinking cultures and the ways in which drinking can act against the creation of home based and international student friendship groups.

Even within the homogeneity of UK students, there remains the puzzle of specific student identities and experiences and the implications these have for learning and

teaching. Paper six 'Negotiating an identity in English' and paper seven 'Lone parents as HE students' focus on several aspects of this puzzle. The latter paper reminds us, if we needed it, that students are people too; people with families, worries, relationships, jobs, all of which impact on their HEI experience. This leads us on to the final set of papers which looks at engagement with the wider curriculum and world beyond the classroom and reminds us that our students are – frequently – the best ambassadors for HE.

The range of topics in this monograph is in no sense exhaustive and indeed on reading them, they generate a host of questions. And so they should. The monograph was published not because we were silly enough to think we could provide (all the) answers but because we are anxious to stimulate conversation among our community (and further afield) about the nature of the student experience today so that by engaging in that conversation, we can hope to stimulate improved learning and teaching.

# Making sense of student cultures in higher education today

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## **Abstract**

*Higher education in a postmodern, market-driven world is quite a different beast to 25 years ago. Today it is in and of a world centred on consumption and consuming, globalized knowledge and high tech communication networks. Indeed, students coming into university are often more adept and familiar with these networks than many of their tutors. If the word 'culture' can be used to explain a level of collective existence of a group of individuals can we ascribe this concept to the student body? If so, is its meaning unequivocal in an uncertain world? This paper explores student behaviours, expectations and attitudes in an attempt to make sense of student culture in contemporary society. It examines some of the complexities inherent in the very notion of culture and it suggests a framework to capture student cultures. This framework is based on the idea that students are individual consumers engaged in 'individualistic conformity' through their participation in higher education in a market-driven globalised world.*

## **Introduction**

This paper presents some of the complexities associated with definitions of 'culture' and considers how these relate to the undergraduate student body today. It begins with a consideration of definitions of culture in an attempt to establish a framework within which to examine and explore the student experience and its cultures. It goes on to discuss the changed and changing expectations of the student in a market-driven, globalised world in which education has become a vehicle for social reform and higher education commodified and branded; the panacea for economic success. Meanwhile the student has become the 'individual' learner, consumer of a commodity partaking of cultures as appropriate, and relative to individual identity and needs. The tension inherent in the consequent clash of cultures leads to a questioning of the purpose of higher education today. The discussion does not lead to a definitive meaning of student culture but rather in its conclusions implies the need for further research and debate in an attempt to make sense of student cultures.

## **Defining 'culture'**

There is no consensus as to the precise definition of culture; indeed, the word has been described as one of the most complicated words in the English language (Williams,



1976, in Milner & Browitt, 2002). Hartman (1997, p.30 quoted in Milner & Browitt, 2002) underlines the complexity of the word 'culture' and notes the way it is used with other words – “camera culture, gun culture, service culture, museum culture, deaf culture, football culture”. According to Hartman it acts almost like a “linguistic weed” which attaches itself to different and various other words, and I would add, which propagates exponentially in modern times to include a multitude of other concepts such as youth culture, gay culture, black culture, and of course student culture. Chaney (2002, p.7) also acknowledges the complexities of the word culture and in his definition points to the distinctiveness of the changing cultural environment which includes the “cultural homogeneity of conventional experience, the expansion of the means of entertainment... and increased leisure time which has changed the... rhythms of daily life as well as created new consumer goods and services”.

We can no longer understand culture as necessarily being a framework of values and beliefs shared by a majority, a nation state for instance; culture becomes cultures and increasing numbers of social groups are distinguishing themselves through cultural differentiation. Both Chaney (2002) and Hall (Taylor et al., 2002) speak of cultural fragmentation and pluralism; Chaney (2002, p.172) points to the way in which cultures are increasingly difficult to contain in one space such that they “bleed into everyday life”. The delineation between the cultural and the social is becoming blurred and the notion of what is ‘multi’ cultural is changing. It is no longer solely part of political discourse and an attempt to promote social cohesion based on cultural, and especially religious and racial, differentiation. It should be understood in the wider sense of a society which constitutes a multitude of self-determining as well as determined ‘cultures’, held together (albeit precariously) by and within a globally oriented social framework. What then is meant by student cultures in this context? To try to answer this question we must consider the context of higher education in contemporary society and the learning environment in which student cultures flourish.

### **The context of Higher Education**

According to Tomlinson (2001, p.166), education is part of a world “where people have to make their way without fixed referents and traditional anchoring points”. But “the lack of a centre and the floating of meaning are understood as phenomena to be celebrated rather than regretted” (Usher & Edwards, 1994, p.2). In some respects this marks a real difference from what went before. Traditionally the university has generally been held to be guardian of “knowledge and the pursuit of learning for their own sake” (Graham, 2002, p.20). Its scholars encouraged development of the individual through the pursuit of knowledge and by means of one methodology. Association with skills and training was through the professions. In the modern university there are “an infinite number of knowledges, endlessly interweaving and cross-fertilizing” (Taylor et al., 2002, p.8). The university is “very clearly, in and of the world” (p.9). The environment in which undergraduates pursue knowledge is one of wide choice, governed by rules of performativity and quality systems, and filled with modular curricula and assessment regimes which emphasise skills and competencies as well as (or some might argue instead of) the quest for truth. Wolf (2002) contends that recent UK education

policy has been operating under the misconception that education at every level is a precondition to economic growth and success. Nevertheless, universities have entered the global marketplace and along with schools and colleges vie for individual clients or customers. Education is treated as a public service and increasingly as a “private good rather than a public responsibility” (Whitty, 2003, p.79).

The 21<sup>st</sup> century university is, some would argue, a space in which a variety of truths coexist in a unified diversity, and in which a key feature is “credentialism” (Abercrombie et al., 2000), linked to market forces and economic imperatives. In other words, qualifications (certificates and diplomas) are increasingly pre-requisites for certain jobs and careers, for material success. Education, or more precisely those institutions for whom the prime aim is to deliver education, continues to perform a selection function. Knowledge is power, but it is no longer an absolute, and what was once regarded as the domain of the private has, since the mid 1980s, begun to penetrate the domain of the university. However, this has led to tensions with regard to academic freedom as well as the purpose and role of higher education institutions:

[T]he western university [has become] the site of major culture wars over race, ethnicity, religion and gender [and] these developments have had major repercussions for academic freedom which can no longer be seen as occupying a neutral space free of politics.

*(Menand, 1997, quoted in Delanty, 2001, p.142)*

The composition of the student body has by implication changed quite dramatically, ostensibly in the pursuit of and need for social equity, opening hitherto closed or only partially open avenues to higher education for the working class, women and minority groups (Jones, 1990).

### **Student cultures**

In such a climate it is perhaps unsurprising that the current student body is less collectively politically active compared to their counterparts in Britain in the 1970s, or in Paris during the May 1968 counter-cultural revolution. “The ideological battles of the late sixties are over and have been replaced by... identity battles” (Graff, 1992, quoted in Delanty, 2001, p.145) which are fought on the basis of individual needs. Tensions between “widening participation, equality of opportunity and education for social purpose... on the one hand, and the pressure towards skills training and employer involvement... on the other”, and between ‘elite’, old and ‘new’ universities” (Taylor et al. 2002, p.14) describe in part the academic environment in which undergraduates operate today. The question is, how does this impact on their sense of identity – on their cultures? Drawing on the various definitions of culture outlined in the first part of this paper together with Barnett’s (1990, p.96) reference to the culture of higher education as functioning at two levels (the first in relation to the academic community and the second in relation to the students and their experience), I will now consider student cultures within two broad frames of reference. Firstly, one which concerns values, beliefs and habits in the context of academe, study and learning, and may

be equally related to the social sphere. Secondly, one which relates to the student experience and to expectations which students have of themselves and which others, be it tutors, the institution or society at large, may have of them.

Students now enter higher education with a range of different life as well as learning experiences which impact significantly on their student experience:

There is substantial variation in the way they conceive of learning and in the way they have approached their learning;... their prior experiences are qualitatively different.

*(Prosser & Trigwell, 2000)*

Variation in prior experience encourages cross-fertilisation of ideas and practices within the student body, but does it produce a 'new' set of cultural references or is there simply replication of wider society in a more protected and more intimate context? Certain practices do seem to be student specific fostered by both the disciplines with which students engage and the type of institution in which students find themselves. In a paper which presents a picture of the field of student positions within UK higher education institutions, Lapping (2005, p.657) suggests that student positions can be understood as "a product of intersections between institutional cultures, gender regulations and the socially situated codes of specific academic disciplines". She argues that the academic culture associated with the academic discipline, allied with expectations associated with the culture of the institution itself, may over-determine different aspects of student positions. The result can be to enhance and perpetuate social hierarchies of both social class and gender within the given institution and discipline, or to mitigate existing social divisions. Lapping also contends that the combination of students' prior experience and 'cultural capital', with practices and 'cultures' associated with the discipline or institution, do not necessarily produce 'new' cultures but instead reinforce or attenuate what already exists. This echoes Bourdieu's idea that "social formations are structured around a complex ensemble of social fields in which various forms of power circulate" (Naidoo, 2004, p.458). The field is structured in hierarchy and the positions within depend on the specific resources possessed by and in relation to each of the occupants. Bourdieu refers to these field-specific resources as 'capital' and they may be social or cultural (as opposed to economic) (Naidoo, 2004):

Higher education is conceptualized as a sorting machine that selects students according to an implicit social classification and reproduces the same students according to an explicit academic classification, which in reality is very similar to the implicit social classification.

*(Bourdieu, 1996, quoted in Naidoo, 2004, p.459)*

Education is the vehicle for transmission of 'cultural capital', the cognitive structures constitutive of the dominant cultural models in society (Delanty, 2001, p.90) and which are symbolised largely in today's society by 'credentials', qualifications, certification,

evidence of educational 'success'. Education is a valuable commodity and students are consumers of this commodity. Learning is commodified, and in this "pervasive market context... the learner is seen as a customer" (Taylor et al., 2002, p.123). In fact, like a customer the student can shop around, has individual choice, and becomes a strategic consumer of a service. Students must then by inference display some of the behaviours one might associate with consumer culture, for example the expectation of value for money. Graham (2002, p.47) notes, interestingly, that "students may vote with their feet, but do not vote with their purses". This is an interesting observation in the climate of top-up tuition fees. It has been largely assumed that top-up fees would deter a significant number of students from traditional subjects and from entering higher education altogether, but although a large constituency of students is fully appraised of the financial investment they are making in engaging with higher education, and unsurprisingly display the characteristics of an astute consumer, a significant group of 'others' manifest the same consumerist behaviours whilst having little or no notion of the financial burden they may be storing up for themselves.

Notwithstanding the above, the idea of student as stakeholder does have its positive aspects. In their discussion of learner autonomy and what this actually means in the context of New Labour HE policy development, Taylor et al. argue that the impact of New Labour ideology is its:

"genuine commitment to cultural change in the educational context so that learners should have a real say in that learning process. Learners are stakeholders and have a right to negotiate and, to an extent, to choose, what, when and how they study".

*Taylor et al. (2002, p.123)*

In the same way that the competitive educational market is meant to drive up standards in schools, student surveys and league tables are meant to improve the quality of the undergraduate learning experience. As Wolf (2002) points out, just because something is a valuable commodity, this does not mean that more of it is by definition a good idea. The government's eagerness to "widen access to further and higher education and to make them [HEIs] more responsive to the needs of the economy" (DES, 1988) in the name of social equity and economic exigency, has not taken sufficient account of the consequent implications for higher education.

### **'Individualistic conformity'**

The idea of a collective existence encapsulated in 'culture' which could be used to explain everyday experience (Chaney, 2002), and which could in the case of the undergraduate student body be used by the academic to explain an individual's learning behaviour, is no longer current. Students are bringing individual traits to their undergraduate study which might fit with the cultural characteristics of a smaller, more clearly delineated group, but which are essentially 'individual'. Emphasis is placed on "lifestyle, individual difference and choice as defining characteristics for contemporary society" (Taylor et al., 2002, p.6). In New Labour policy consideration of the collective

is excluded, and the initiatives of the late 1990s with regard to widening participation, however commendable in principle "...are focused almost entirely upon the individual's accessibility and progression" (Taylor et al., 2002, p.24). Student radicalism and opposition to the "gross materialism" associated with an affluent, consumer driven society, as reported by Zweig in his survey of student opinion in 1963 (Smart, 2002), has all but disappeared with the development of "academic capitalism" (Slaughter & Leslie, 1997 in Smart, 2002) and increased "branding of learning" (Klein, 2000 in Smart, 2002). The collective non-conformity typical of the student body in the late 1960s and early 1970s has developed into an 'individualistic conformity'. One's individuality is not understood in the context of belonging to a larger group through common world views or political stances, through positions with regard to the 'big' political and cultural issues of the day, but rather one's individual identity allows access to and membership of smaller, more intimate groups held together by shared cultural prerogatives.

Perhaps surprisingly, one element of this 'individualistic conformity' can be seen in the way in which young people engage with, and to a degree rely on, information and new technologies to communicate with each other and to negotiate and try to make sense of the world in which they live. Do shared modes of communication constitute the shared sense of community essential to the notion of 'culture'? The paradox is that although such communication networks allow greater freedom and mobility, they tend to make the experience of the collective, as described above, redundant. Just as the boundaries of locality are now more arbitrarily defined due to new communication and information technologies (Chaney, 2002), so too are these technologies impacting significantly on the way in which students interact with their discipline, with their peers, as well as how they engage with their learning. For example, the university library is no longer the hub of intellectual activity, indeed the library environment itself has had to change quite dramatically to become a place where knowledge is sought and ideas are thrashed out in communal spaces and state of the art learning zones, and where information can be gathered simultaneously from around the globe in a matter of seconds. Crook (2002, p.122) argues that the virtualisation of students' learning disturbs four aspects of the traditional institutional culture of higher education: time, place, community, and materials. However, he also contends that this is a positive change and that higher education institutions should, on the contrary, embrace this and adapt to it. Through the new communication technologies "...universities now have the possibility of reinventing themselves as places of encounter for cultures and knowledges across the world" (p.322). He argues for a "cosmopolitan university" which would aspire to produce a "contingent universalism", which takes seriously "a plurality of world views without losing the sense that there exists the possibility of knowing and realizing sets of values that may in fact be common, or become common, to all humanity" (Wallerstein 1996, p.87 quoted in Crook 2002, p.122).

### **Concluding thoughts**

This paper has attempted to make some sense of student cultures in the context of higher education today and to consider how student cultures and the student experience relate not only to the academic world but to the globalised world of which

they are part. Student 'culture' no longer resides in the taken-for-granted aspects of a shared community (Barnett, 1990) but instead student 'cultures' find their roots in a knowledge-driven, utilitarian society where education equals qualifications, qualifications indicate knowledge, knowledge means power and power leads to 'success'. This world without boundaries is difficult to navigate, despite technology. Just as we speak of the crisis of modern youth, so too we bemoan the crisis in higher education – falling standards, de-motivated students, poor literacy and numeracy skills, increasing reliance on virtual learning environments, a 'culture' of dependency and so it goes on. What we understand as student cultures may well simply be determined by individual 'coping mechanisms' which students deploy as they are thrust into yet another sea of choice in their transition from school to university or employment back to education (see Fisher, 1994). This paper has merely scratched the surface of a debate which, to my mind, will be at the root of much of the discussion around the possible futures of higher education in the coming years. Higher education appears to acquiesce in western industrialised society's redefinition of culture and has become complacent, preferring skills and competencies associated with 'employability' and economic success (albeit important) to "open debate and critical discourse" (Barnett, 1990). The concept of 'culture' can help to advance and elucidate our understanding of the student experience.

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# Learning, identity and learning about identity: the role of connectedness

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## **Abstract**

*This paper discusses the role of connectedness in young people's developing sense of self from sixth form college to university. The research focuses on 12 young people interviewed over a twelve month period from when they had just finished their A levels to the end of their first year at university. Their lives, and their stories, are shaped by educational contexts, and as learning is a central activity of this late adolescent period a particular focus of the study was the effect of learning, both subject-based and general learning, on identities.*

*Giddens' work on the self as a reflexive project informed the choice of narrative methodology. The pivotal nature of relationship in both the development of their identity and learning emerged from their accounts, and in this paper the effects of relationship, particularly group-life, on identity is seen to be significant. Group-life has both facilitative and constraining qualities. The community of practice literature is used to analyse the informal group's effect on identity but I argue this literature does not sufficiently interrogate the quality of relationships it describes. I draw on friendship studies to develop discussion of the variety and quality of those relationships.*

*The dominance of the group in the students' lives has afforded the opportunity to develop skills in negotiating and managing complex situations. University enables those skills to be tested, and this provides learning about themselves and their capabilities.*

*Finally, the paper raises questions about the nature of reflexivity, both in relation to the students' identity work and also in the relationship between student and researcher.*

## **Introduction**

"The narrative of the self secures meaning through a narrative of 'connectedness'." (Weeks et al., 2001, p. 25). This paper concerns one aspect of the findings from a small-scale qualitative study of young peoples' developing sense of self, that is, the significance of connectedness. The young people were first interviewed as they were waiting for, or had just heard, their A level results, and they were followed through the first year of their university life. Their lives, then, and their stories, are shaped by educational contexts, and as learning is a central activity of this late adolescent period

the author particularly explored with them the effect of learning, both subject-based and general learning, on identities. What emerged from their narratives both before and during university life was the dominance of the group in their lives. The paper discusses the way participation in groups affects learning and identity. It focuses on informal groups, as accounts of these are more pervasive than of formal groups in the students' responses. Such accounts highlight the importance of social and informal spaces in identity-building. Although the connectedness described is chiefly between the young people and others in the communities they establish, it also refers to the connectedness between them and the author as researcher, and raises questions about the role of the researcher in identity-work.

The research draws on Giddens' (1991) work to conceptualise identity as self-reflexive and self-constructing; a "reflexive project" (1991, p.9), but, it is argued, the rhetoric of choice is problematic (Lawy, 1998). Choice is limited by both structural constraints, and the effects of group-life on young people which shape identities through facilitative and constraining properties. Connectedness as a key theme in young people's lives is posited in contrast to the individualism and agency stressed by authors such as Giddens. Connectedness also refers to the communities the university students form which, although temporal and liminal, are often characterised by shared values, trust and reciprocity which render them a crucial resource of social capital. The paper utilises Wenger's community of practice literature, but claims that it does not sufficiently interrogate the quality of relationships it describes, and studies on friendship are used to emphasise both the identity-shaping and social capital elements of connectedness.

### **Research strategy**

Narrative methodology was chosen as the tool to capture the young people's accounts of their developing selves as they moved between educational contexts. Elliott has stressed three elements which are associated with narrative in social research:

- the "temporal or chronological dimension"
- the communication of meaning
- the social dimension of narrative (Elliott, 2005, p.15).

While the subjects of the research are the young people narrating and making meaningful their experiences over a specific and significant period of their lives, this reflexive methodology also allows the researcher to reflect on their role in the students' reflexivity.

The research sample referred to in this paper consists of 12 young people, three male and nine female who were all just leaving one of three sixth form colleges, two of which are in a southern city and one in a northern city, at the time of the first interview.

Two local sixth form colleges provided the names of six students who were starting university in Autumn 2006 who would be willing research subjects. The other six students volunteered themselves having heard about the research via word of mouth.

The 12 are a relatively homogenous group predominantly from comfortable middle-class homes. All were 18 or 19 at first interview. 10 are white whilst two have dual heritage (both British/Indian). Each student was interviewed at least twice, once before starting university, and again during their first year. Contact was throughout the year, and at the end of it 11 of the 12 were emailed to ask for any end-of-year-reflections (the twelfth had decided to take a gap year so was interviewed a year later). Five emailed back with their accounts. An additional two suggested they be interviewed again. A variety of methods were used to collect information about their identities. These included questionnaires, email, text messages and visits to them in their new lives. Different media seemed to produce different facets of identity. Walls of student rooms were important sites of identity-work. They literally provided a blank canvas upon which a student's first instinct was to stamp an identity.

The smallness and homogeneity of the group means there can be no claims for representivity, and it would be unwise to make generalisations from the sample under study. Instead the paper offers one of the many "grounded, multiple and local studies of lives in all their rich flux and change" (2001, p.13) that Plummer links to the recent rise of what can broadly be termed life-story work in the social sciences.

### **Identity and group-life**

Analysis of the young people's narratives highlighted the way in which their lives were dominated by group-life. The importance of the peer group in young people's lives is unsurprising, but two issues in particular are worth further exploration. Firstly, the effects of group-life on identity and secondly the way in which young people develop skills to manage group-life.

Again unsurprisingly, many of the young people in their first interview when describing school and college experiences revealed the problematic nature of group-life. Three of the 12 volunteered the fact they felt bullied at school, and one stated in her opening statement about school-life that she was a bully. Tales from both male and female students of in-fighting and constant fallings in and out of friendship were common. This meant that by the time the young people arrived at university, many had developed the social skills necessary to negotiate group-life. The new situation of starting university enabled them to draw on these social skills, such as assertiveness and mediation, and by employing them effectively they realised something about themselves and their identity. Several students commented on their surprise at their ability to manage group-living and the complexities of establishing rules and routines among a group of hitherto unknown individuals.

The students also described groups they belonged to before university being constraining of identity as well as facilitative. Several of the students explained in the interviews undertaken at university that they were able to experiment with dress and behaviour at university in ways that was not possible before because of the way the group's unspoken rules demanded conformity. University provided an opportunity "to be who I want to be" (Alice).

## **Communities of practice and informal groupings in educational contexts**

The literature on communities of practice provides a tool for analysing what goes on in groups that are bound together in a shared endeavour by understandings and routines which have evolved within the group. Communities of practice are where, through participation, meanings are negotiated and “shared histories of learning” (Wenger, 1998, p.87) developed. Lea has noted that the term community of practice has now “become ubiquitous in the literature of teaching and learning in higher education” (Lea 2005, p.186), although the original ideas of situated learning (Lave and Wenger, 1991) and communities of practice (Wenger, 1998) were not developed in a formal educational context. Lea has argued that when applied to Higher Education, communities of practice became a concept “used uncritically as a top-down educational model” (ibid). As she argues, recent academic literacies research has raised doubts that groups including both tutor and student could be seen as participating in the same communities of practice where power imbalances, played out through impenetrable academic discourse, “tend to position undergraduate students as permanent novices, never attaining full membership of an academic community of practice” (2005, p.193).

However, the literature is useful, I argue, when applied to informal groupings within the university. These may come together for academic purposes (informal peer groups), or social, and the community of practice literature enables us to view the students through a lens of individuals participating in groups and groupings in a shared endeavour of the successful integration into new lives. The literature illuminates the creation of meanings and the development of identity in the students’ participation in practices.

## **Friendships as a source of identity and social support**

However, the literature does not adequately capture the quality and variety of the relationships that are being formed in these communities. Starting university is a significant life change. Weeks has argued that “friendships particularly flourish when overarching identities are fragmented in periods of rapid social change, or at turning points in people’s lives, or when lives are lived at odds with social norms” (Weeks et al., 2001, p.51 citing Weeks, 1995, pp.145-6).

In a recent study of friendships, Spencer and Pahl argued that rather than emphasising the “corroding effects of individualization” (Spencer and Pahl, 2006) that has been the subject of recent commentaries on postmodern society, their findings reveal “a serious misunderstanding of the dynamics of micro-social worlds, and particularly the role of friendship and trust” (2006, p.3) The writers argue that their work demonstrates the existence of “hidden solidarities” in personal communities that people develop around themselves.

Although Spencer and Pahl do not focus on students’ friendships, this notion of “hidden solidarities” chimes with this paper’s findings which reveal the prevalence of significant friendships, founded on loyalty and trust, that could be said to provide the social capital students draw upon to get them through transitional insecurities. Pahl

(2000) discusses friendships both replicating and sustaining family relationships. In this research, connectedness occurred on many levels, and the narratives told revealed similar patterns of quality relationships as described by Pahl. Of particular note was one friendship between two male students who knew each other before starting at the same university. One, Nick, had been allocated a hall of residence where friendships were made easily and he was well-connected and content. The other, Martin, had found it impossible to make friends with the people in his residence as they were a particularly studious group who had little interest in socialising. The way in which Nick supported Martin, integrating him into his newly formed group of friends and even keeping Martin's sleeping bag in a corner of his room so that Martin could stay over whenever he wanted, was a story of significant friendship. Space does not permit lengthy discussion of the literature on friendship and gender, but except for some notable exceptions, much of the literature has focused on female friendships, and the friendships between male students warrants further investigation.

Rosalyn also illustrates the way in which students provide support for each other. She spoke about birthdays and how in those first few weeks when the students realized people had a birthday they would make a point of buying a cake and generally making a fuss of them as they had no family to do that for them. There was much talk of "looking out for your flatmates" – an assumption that people would find certain things hard and it was important to be there for them. Rosalyn talked about staying up all night with a friend whose long-term relationship from back home had become a casualty of the move away to university. "Well you have to, don't you? We're all in this together" she said.

Friendship is an experience of identity because of the way it is founded on trust and attachment as well as the self-reflection friendships afford. As Pahl puts it, "the way our friends interpret us helps us to interpret ourselves" (2000, p.81). Of course friendship is also shaped by structural contexts. Allan writes:

"Class, ethnicity, gender, kinship, caste, age, and whatever other social divisions are most pertinent to that society at that period will impact on the "freedoms" there are to develop forms of informal relationship and shape the consequent solidarities that emerge" (1998, p.71).

Brannen and Nilsen, in a discussion about biographical choice, warn that "the structural side of life is more often expressed in the silences which punctuate narratives" (2005, p.423). The effects of structure on "choice" and identity are profound but run through the students' narratives in subtle ways and are the subject of further exploration elsewhere.

### **Identities and communities of practice**

Wenger's work positions the group as a site of learning, meaning and identity. The concept of trajectories is used to describe how identity is developed as an individual engages in different forms of participation. Giddens, too, writes of a trajectory of the self to imply a continual re-evaluation and re-working of identity. His use of the concept of lifestyles, or "routinised practices" chimes with the way identities are formed in

communities of practice. These explicit and tacit practices, Wenger explains, include:

the language, tools,...symbols....that various practices make explicit for various purposes. But it also includes...tacit conventions, subtle cues, untold rules of thumb...and shared world views (1998, p.47)

In the following quote from Alice it is possible to see how her involvement in a community of practice impacts on her learning, as well as her self-consciousness of using a practice (understandings about plagiarism) specific to it:

*Most of the learning takes place outside of lectures and seminars...As a group, we often help each other out with essays, presentations and stuff by sharing books we've found useful, talking about how we've written things and helping each other out generally (pause) whilst avoiding plagiarism (she laughs) I'm sure I have to say that!*

Sangita also highlights the importance of the group in her learning and identity. She says:

*Being a modern foreign language student is amazing, there seems to be a real sense of community between us. Many people think that a language is easy and don't understand the extent of it – we do lots more besides just French, like history, literature, arts...I really enjoy putting my studying into context, like I bought Le Monde and it had an article with the French lady who had had the first face transplant – she'd refused to do an interview with the English press..... I managed to read the whole interview without using a dictionary, and really felt a sense of achievement when I opened the Guardian, and they had done a review of the very article in Le Monde!*

In this passage Sangita shows the development of an identity not just as a student but as a student linguist, and she does this by positioning herself against other students, in her suggestion that other students do not understand what it takes to be a language student.

Sangita also exemplifies the more “tacit conventions” and “untold rules of thumb” of practice:

*I didn't think I would get so stressed about exams, or that I had it in me to stay up all night and write an essay in pure desperation to just get it finished. I didn't think it was possible to like Red Bull...! I'm not sure I would have got through exams without it!*

### **Reflexivity in learning about identity**

Sangita can be seen to be engaging in reflexive self-learning. Other responses from interviewees are peppered with phrases which show how they talk about the processes of becoming connected (after a safe distance), and in so doing learn something about themselves and their capabilities:

*(Eventually) we talked about how in the first week we were desperate to make friends and how you have to be so strategic, ...you end up spending time with people you don't particularly like because you're desperate (Alice).*

It also became apparent as the research progressed that the role of the researcher played an important role in students' reflexivity. An extract from the research diary describes Nick who was obviously enjoying life in the north:

*As a summarising statement I said he seemed very content up here, he seemed "to fit". The way he beamed "That's nice" made me realise I had made a statement that would form an important part of his identity. He had described to me his developing confidence, his contentment, and how much a part of the place he felt. But in my throwing back to him those reflections I had cemented something for him.*

In professional social work discourse the relationship between critical reflection and the development of professional identity is much analysed. Taylor, for example, explains that because "we grasp our lives in narratives", reflective journals can be used reflexively in the development of social work identities:

"Reflection-on-action plays an important part in the constitution of identity" (Taylor, 2006, p.192).

Giddens also refers to journals and "working through an autobiography...for sustaining an integrated sense of self" (1991, p.76). This raises questions about the extent to which reflexivity occurs without the prompts that writing, being interviewed, or participating in reflexive conversations with friends affords.

Narratives are told to an audience and narrative methodology demands the researcher, as well as the audience, is brought into the frame. The role of the researcher, particularly within qualitative research has recently received much justifiable attention. Capturing "the truth" is problematic for many reasons. One is that "narratives are usually told in a specific context for a particular purpose" (Elliott, 2005, p.15) and can only convey the reality of a particular moment shaped in the context of the teller and the receiver. Another is that the "truth" has to be interpreted by the researcher. As Walkerdine et al. argue, it is important to understand the role of researcher subjectivity and the "tricky place of emotions, ours and the participants', within the research process" (2002, p.194). These authors draw on postmodern psychoanalysis in their exploration of subjectivity in the research process, and discuss the role of transference and counter-transference.

Interestingly, when sweeping through the responses of all of the research respondents in this project it became apparent that, although crammed full of incidents of learning and identity, there was a notable absence of detailed accounts of sex, drugs and alcohol. How could this be? The answer may lie in the fact that the researcher was the same age

as their mothers and through unconscious processes both parties had conveyed that familiar parent-adolescent defensive pact “I don’t want to know and you don’t want to tell me”!

## **Conclusion**

Within this paper the role of connectedness in the reflexive project has been explored. The research has highlighted the dominance of group-life in young people’s lives, and the importance of giving further attention to the processes that facilitate different forms of connectedness, including the nature of reflexivity itself. This may shed light on young people’s developing sense of selves, their use of others and their ability to manage complex social situations. It then begs the question whether such skills can be taught, perhaps within the emerging focus on emotional health and intelligence in school contexts.

I have raised questions about the research process itself and have indicated that just as identities are fragmented and fluid, so are the stories which are told to represent those identities. As Plummer writes: “The world is constituted through multiple refracted perspectives: it is indeed a ‘plural world’, one that is constantly changing and never fixed, and one where meanings are always being negotiated. In such a world, meanings and truth never arrive simply” (Plummer, 2001, p. xi).

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# Rhythm, routine and ritual: strategies for collective living among first year students in halls of residence

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## **Abstract**

*Students' experiences and negotiation of transition to adulthood and communal living in halls of residence are the central themes of this paper which is based on the results of a survey carried out by the authors with students at Leeds Metropolitan University. Key questions in the survey elicited information about how students negotiate the experience of collective living, what strategies and practices they adopt, and how these relate to their transition to adulthood. 42 students from years one, two and three took part in focus groups, responded to questionnaires or completed reflective logs. Findings suggested that transition involves a physical and emotional journey, and has positive and negative aspects. One negative feature was conflict, and three distinct strategies emerged to deal with this: avoidance, direct challenge to others and determined socialisation. Students also developed a range of consistent and repetitive social and cultural practices, reflecting the non-linear character of transition to independence. At times these practices involved a conscious desire to delay obligation and responsibility. They also illustrated the rich and sometimes contradictory nature of collective living, and of how social relationships and adult identity are negotiated. Throughout the passage towards independence, rhythm, routine and ritual appear crucial in providing students with the means of negotiating collective living, and the personal experiences that follow from this. The overwhelming conclusion was that the choice to live in halls of residence was positive.*

## **Rationale**

This research evolved as a result of seminar discussions with students, where they reflected on their shared experiences of living in halls of residence, and how these often represented critical events in relation to transitions into adulthood. These critical events invariably resulted from trying to negotiate and navigate paths through the tensions created by study, domestic responsibilities, friendships and paid work. This process resulted in the development of complex, interconnected strategies to manage their experiences of transition in the context of communal living.

## **Literature review**

The research is informed by theory and research from a number of areas:

- transitions to adulthood
- communal and collective living
- space and time, halls of residence and education.

### *Transitions to Adulthood*

Research has explored young people's perspectives and experiences of key transitions related to the family, education and training, employment, income, accommodation, relationships and consumption (Thomson et al., 2002). These are increasingly understood as interrupted, extended and diverse transitions for young people from different social groups (Allan & Crow, 2001, Goldson et al. 2002, Griffin, 2004, Morrow, 2003, and Roche et al., 2004). Wider social systems shape this transition, for example the state withdrawal of certain forms of support for young people and the expectation that family and/or community will provide this support. The linear trajectory of school, college, university, work is no longer relevant – how young people negotiate the transition to adulthood is complex, with interwoven strands (Allan & Crow, 2001, Mac an Ghail & Haywood, 2005, Morrow, 2003).

A major review of research relating to student experiences of university life in France evoked the complexity of transition from older childhood to young adulthood by concluding that students are young people “discovering the pleasures of a freer kind of sociability” (Galland & Oberti, 2000, p.115) and that “socializing among themselves, they may seem to have been merely thrown together by circumstance, but they are in fact living fundamental, intense modern moments of student experience” (ibid., p.115).

A UK study considered the development of a student ‘habitus’ – the durable and generalised disposition that suffuses a person’s action throughout an entire domain – in relation to students living on campus and at home (Holdsworth, 2006). It concluded that those in the former category developed a more successful student identity, and as a result adapted to university better than those living at home. Mindful of the charge that socio-economic factors may be at play here, this research concedes that although the findings are related to class (students from poorer backgrounds tend to live at home) this does not alone explain the findings. Rather, both the practical problems faced by these students, and the difficulty of integrating into social life at university, and therefore of developing a student identity, or habitus, are strong elements here. Those students who can establish and maintain friendship bonds in their new environment adjust better to student life than those students who remain isolated (Enochs & Roland, 2006).

### *Communal and collective living*

Student experience of collective living can take many forms, but what seems to unite them, and the findings from the research, is that they all contribute in some way to personal development. Thus Jordyn & Byrd (2003) studied some 278 students in New Zealand where they carefully controlled for age and socio-economic status (although no mention is made of gender or ethnicity). They concluded that the living arrangements of students do affect their personal development. More specifically, students living away from parents were more likely to have established an adult identity. The researchers

point out that it is impossible to determine causality here. A study of 782 students in Holland suggests, in contrast to the above study, that there is no correlation between social integration and independent living (Beekhoven, De Jong, & Van Hout, 2004). It also found that students living in halls of residence experienced more personal problems than students living at home. The inescapable conclusion is therefore that “it does not make sense to hold on to the notion that to participate fully in student life, one should live in student rooms” (p.288).

### *Space and time, halls of residence and education*

The concept of space and time in this study, based on the work of Moss (2006), explores the links between routines, rhythms and academic study in the context of life in halls of residence. With this analysis, the lived experiences of daily routines, (although internal to halls of residence) relate to, reflect and are shaped by normative expectations of social life external to halls of residence, for example the clock-led times of work, leisure and study. In addition, routines take on a specific and unique character, forged by the way space is organised within halls of residence and formed by peer group relationships. An important dimension explored in this research is how different spaces within halls of residence are attributed different values and meaning according to architecture and design but these have the potential to be re-designated according to existing or changing needs and desires. Similarly, the personal rhythms which students develop in order to accommodate academic study, leisure and work, often require negotiation and renegotiation in order to meet obligations, responsibilities and needs.

An early study in the United States of the relationship between academic and non-academic areas of student experience concluded that the full potential of students will not be realised until the emotional and physical aspects of their growth are given as much attention as the cognitive dimension (Miller & Prince, 1976). Although many subsequent studies seemed to be preoccupied with how to create powerful learning environments, so that the end product – a successful degree outcome – was the overwhelmingly important factor (Schroeder & Mable 1994), others conclude that specially established residential learning communities did not in fact improve students’ academic achievement and retention directly (Pike, Schroeder & Berry, 1997; Berger, 1997); and the U.S. Boyer Commission (1998), promoted the argument that an important element of creating a learning environment is cultivating a sense of community within halls of residence.

### *Research questions*

This research explores strategies for collective living and the transition to adulthood for students living in halls of residence by addressing the following:

- What are students’ perspectives and experiences of everyday living in halls of residence?
- How do students negotiate the experience of collective living?
- What strategies do they adopt (individually and collectively) and how do these relate to their transition to adulthood?
- What cultural practices are in place, have evolved and are evolving?

## **Research Strategy**

### *How the research was conducted*

The choice of a qualitative approach to inform the research design accommodated the experiential, biographical nature of the material. Selection and design of research tools was a collaborative process involving students who had prompted the initial idea. Using a focus group to help design questionnaires established a student perspective and ensured their experiences and ideas were central (Hinds, 2000).

### *Methods*

All students who took part in this study were studying for an undergraduate degree in Childhood Studies at one institution in England. With one exception, all were female, all from the UK, white and between the ages of 20 and 34 years.

### *Focus groups*

Focus groups were a highly appropriate method for the purposes of this research (Morgan, 1998). Three focus groups, led by the researchers, took place involving a total of 12 students. Research questions were introduced for discussion and the conversations were recorded and transcribed.

### *Questionnaires*

Semi-structured questionnaires, designed to elicit qualitative word-based responses, (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2000) were distributed to participants. Two distinct questionnaires were available: one for students who had lived or were living in Halls of Residence (16 of these were returned) and one for those who did not live or were not living in Halls or Residence (nine of these were returned).

### *Reflective log*

Reflective logs were used to capture what has been called “thick description” (see Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2000, p.293). A pro-forma was developed and used during a session which lasted one hour. A researcher guided students through a series of prompt questions. Five level one students living in halls of residence took part in this.

### *Ethical issues*

Informed consent, confidentiality and anonymity of participants were assured within the focus groups where sensitive material may be shared. A major issue was that of power, and managing the separation of ‘researcher role’ from ‘tutor role’. Participants were assured that there would be no negative consequences to their involvement with the research. Participants were asked to check and approve each stage of the process. Participants’ willingness to continue with, or desire to withdraw from, the research was central to meeting ethical guidelines.

## **Results**

The findings are presented to reflect the themes of the research.

### *Transition to adulthood*

Transition occurred at different levels. Physically – as a movement away home, friends, siblings, parents into a new uncertain place – and emotionally, expressed in terms of excitement, stress and anxiety. The move to university represented a critical moment in which both took place, often simultaneously.

Three distinct strategies were adopted by students in response to specific difficulties arising from collective living, such as noise, sharing bathrooms and kitchens, and harassment or bullying by others.

First, some students withdrew from or avoided conflict and confrontation by eating in their bedroom to avoid the messy kitchen; keeping their personal kitchen equipment in the bedroom to make sure it was clean; and cleaning up after themselves.

A second strategy was directly or indirectly challenging those students who they believed were responsible for problems. This included piling up dirty plates of others outside their door; directly challenging others; and reporting people for bullying.

The third strategy was a conscious and determined effort to socialise by sharing and being co-operative. This included being generous with crockery and food; keeping noise levels down; showing respect for others' personal space; and developing a system with fellow students for sharing facilities.

There was a link between these strategies and the transition to adulthood. Positively, students were conscious of being more independent, assertive and considerate, of having improved negotiating skills, and becoming more mature. Negatively, others reported becoming more emotionally dependent on their family, or finding it difficult to return home and adhere to parents' routines. There was also mention of financial hardship resulting from newly-found independence.

### *Communal and collective living*

The overwhelming conclusion was that the choice to live in halls was positive, although many students experienced negative incidents, mostly in relation to domestic arrangements and tensions in relationships with others. Students found themselves amongst others with varied expectations and prior experience of living arrangements, attempting to adapt to changed circumstances. For most this state of flux and uncertainty was resolved through socialising and learning about each other, negotiating individual and collective routines and rhythms of collective living.

### *Space and time, halls of residence and education*

A variety of routines developed. When students did not have classes or work to attend, mornings tended to be solitary and slow. Consistent cultural practices included a form

of day-night reversal, with late nights followed by late morning or afternoon rising the following day; and watching low-quality daytime television. Students understood these behaviours as a 'regression' away from adulthood, surrendering responsibility, direction and obligations, where the structure of clock-led time on routines became blurred.

Routines associated with domestic tasks highlighted some challenges encountered by students on first entering halls, for example, having to phone home to find out how to use the washing machine. Many talked about conflict arising from the pressure on space. While communal areas such as the kitchen provided a space for cooking and eating, they were cold and small, so bedroom or study space became the favoured area for eating and socialising. Some activities emulated home life: cooking Sunday lunch replicated what students perceived to be 'adult' activities which they were now choosing to do for themselves with their flatmates.

A further routine was preparation for nights out. This began, at around 7.00pm, with a 'buzz' associated with personal grooming: the noise of showers, music or hairdryers, and smells and fragrances. Closed bedroom and flat doors would then open to signal the beginning of communal time and space in corridors or other shared areas.

Nights out in groups often gave rise to a common cultural practice: collecting trophies and challenging authority. This included recognised unacceptable behaviours such as smuggling large signs from buildings, or traffic signs and cones back into the hall of residence (having to avoid the security staff in the process). Sometimes there would be a pre-designated target such as 'collecting' large posters. These activities often had a competitive element, with the person with the largest or most impressive example being declared the winner.

An interesting cultural practice emerged when students described the 'walk of shame', a ritual response directed at flatmates who stayed out all night, returning in the same clothes they went out in, the assumption being that they had 'pulled'. While this was a source of embarrassment it was also a sign of sexual prowess and the response from those who had woken in their own beds was a juxtaposition of moral disapproval and celebration.

The move to university represented a conscious decision to seek out independence. Critical though in their decision-making was the opportunity to live in university halls as this represented a kind of 'half way' transition to adulthood. Physical security, the knowledge that money management would be made easier by the inclusion of bills in the rent and the potential for meeting new and different people in a supportive environment were all important criteria.

## **Discussion and conclusions**

The findings support the notion that the transition to adulthood does not progress in a linear fashion (Thomson et al., 2002). Rather it involves faltering steps towards independence, critical incidents which propel students forward, and a conscious decision

by some students to work at becoming independent, by dealing with challenges in particular ways. At other times, students seem to retreat into less adult-like behaviour. Throughout this inexorable journey towards independence, the functions of rhythm, routine and ritual appear crucial in providing students with the means of negotiating, processing and understanding collective living, and the personal, individualised experiences that follow from this.

The experience of dislocation emerges in the descriptions of emotional responses to separation but also in the sudden lack of an imposed daily structure. Daily routines were suddenly beyond the gaze of adults, even though, at the same time, these acted as a reference point for what they 'should' be doing. Social interactions allow students to learn about their flatmates; develop supportive networks; exchange information; discover themselves; learn to challenge, negotiate and manage tensions and conflict. Initially tentative social interactions become embedded in the development of routines and rhythms of collective living – individually, collectively, internally (within the flat), externally (in the wider world outside the flat). The haphazard grouping of young people emerges as a more coherent social group strengthened through the rituals of shared experience which make sense of their new lives as students living in halls of residence.

Within this liminal passage of time, clear rhythms and routines developed in relation to clock time and the use of space. Students were conscious that some of these (sleeping in late, watching poor quality television) were clear manifestations of a carefree attitude to their student years; that they knew they were moving towards independence but that this was coupled with a desire to delay obligation or responsibility. There is something of a paradox here: in expressing their independence, perhaps from parental control, students appeared to have a need to experience an almost childlike state which buffered them from the negative aspects of independence. The findings of Wilcox, Winn & Fyvie-Gauld (2005) that within transition, friends provide emotional support, equivalent to family relationships, were borne out in our research. Similarly, in coping with and responding to stress, our research echoed the findings of Shaikh & Deschamps (2006) that students rely on peer support rather than formal student support services.

The rituals described by students seemed to relate mostly to social interactions, suggesting that they serve an important social function related to the transition to adulthood. Such behaviours as 'stealing' signs or traffic cones and smuggling them back to the halls, as challenging authority figures, and the 'walk of shame' may be ways in which students negotiate questions such as what is acceptable or unacceptable behaviour and who defines acceptability. Furthermore, it may be that the ritual itself, especially one involving a 'prize' for the most outlandish exemplar, celebrates, in the transition to adulthood, the freedom from influences normally constraining behaviour. Some rituals – such as the 'walk of shame' – seem imbued with contradictory meanings, simultaneously representing success and failure.

These rituals can further be viewed as personal transitions played out in a public manner. They appear to be, in the words of Galland & Oberti (2000, p.115)



“fundamental, intense modern moments of student experience” which contribute to personal development. The social imperative of ritual may have the function of capturing, subverting and reinventing popular culture within the students’ world. In defying rules and expectations, students may be saying ‘Look at me, I am here, being bold, independent, grown up.’ In this way, rituals could confirm and strengthen individual and group social identity and, linked to communal living, a sense of social location. Thus the rituals become integral to the student experience as a whole, and therefore become part of wider student culture.

### **Limitations of the research**

The sample used in this research has a heavy female bias. Furthermore, the relatively small sample from only one higher education institution limits the general applicability of the findings. Future research could serve to address these limitations by using a larger sample of both genders from a range of institutions.

Further work could also consider race, ethnicity, class, or disability. The literature focusing on the relationships between social divisions and higher education has concentrated primarily on widening participation agendas on access to university education for marginalised or minority groups. Within this, there are references to broader issues influencing student choices, including expectations about the experience of university life. There is also a body of research examining difference and diversity as it relates to student experiences of higher education (Forsyth & Furlong, 2000; Forsyth & Furlong, 2003; Furlong, 2007; Fleischer & Wilcox, 2007; Cooke & Bowl, 2007).

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# Living and learning: students' talk and investments in university culture

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## **Abstract**

*This paper discusses students' talk about their expectations and experiences of living and learning at university. Drawing on two qualitative research projects at the University of the West of England, this paper considers how a discursive analysis approach to students talk offers new ways of conceptualising the student experience, namely, the ways in which students draw on and invest in what can be termed, 'modalities of learning'. The paper will then go on to introduce four key 'modalities' and highlight the implications those modalities have for both the theory and practice of teaching and learning.*

## **Introduction**

How do students themselves talk about learning? And what can their talk tell us as tutors about the learning process? This paper draws on two related Teaching and Learning projects at the University of the West of England, in Bristol (UWE)<sup>1</sup>. Both projects involved qualitative interviews (including focus groups and one-to-one interviews) with students across the Humanities and Arts faculties on aspects of the student learning experience. Students' talk was transcribed and discursively analysed. This paper discusses our key findings and examines how those findings can help us understand what students want from us<sup>2</sup>, and what *they* think 'we' want from 'them'.

## **Literature review**

Smith and Hopkins (2005) point out that students and tutors can have different expectations of what it means to learn. They echo Ballinger (2002) and others in their assertion that the change from intensive structured learning to independent study is perceived by students as "*the major difference*" they experience, and conclude that "subsequently students arrive with little experience or understanding of the demands of working independently" (2005, p.309). Ballinger goes on to develop this point: new students often "struggle to find a voice" within the social and institutional practices of university (Ballinger 2004, p.105), a struggle which Clerehan argues can

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<sup>1</sup> The Student Experience Project (2006) which looked at students' experiences of transition from 6th form to university, and The Assessment Feedback project (2007) which researched students' expectations and uses of various forms of assessment feedback. Full reports available from [Kate.Brooks@uwe.ac.uk](mailto:Kate.Brooks@uwe.ac.uk)

<sup>2</sup> This paper assumes that 'we' are 'tutors'.

be exacerbated by the “vague exhortations” from lecturers as to what they expect (Clerehan 2003, p.80).

Whilst Smith and Hopkins (2005) point out that lecturers can and do perceive a gap between school learning mode (perceived as passive, very structured) and university (independent, ‘learning for life’), how they perceive the gap is significant. In reviewing a number of these studies, Marland suggests that not ‘minding the gap’, could be down to lecturers’ inverse snobbism – students are traditionally expected to “just get on with it” (2003, p.4). Ballinger also notes that first year teaching can be seen by some lecturers as “the lowest priority” (2002, p.99). Following this, Tinto paints a subsequent picture of students alienated and uninvolved in a ‘show and tell’ teaching environment which does not encourage participation and is ultimately “uninvolving” (2000, p.1). Likewise, noting that “it is all too easy in a lecture silently to drown”, Smith argues that lectures “can very easily reinforce the image of the learner as passive recipient, and, if the student is floundering, s/he can easily switch off and daydream” (2004, p.87).

Such discussions feed into, and come out of, the general assumption that standards of university learning are inexorably declining (cf. Furedi, 2003), an outlook shared by Grisoni and Wilkinson who pessimistically argue that students see themselves as “consumers of services and staff as providers of service” (2005, p.4). Tait and Entwistle go on to argue that, “this view drives out creativity, complexity, ambiguity and ultimately all learning as...both staff and students collude with a cultural norm which tends towards instrumentalism and strategic approaches to learning” (1996, p.98).

Increasingly, however, more optimistic voices are joining the debate, focusing on the idea that if appropriate forms of student support are identified and implemented, the problem of declining standards will be resolved. These studies into student support adopt a more liberal and, as Haggis (2006) describes, ‘humanist’ approach, assuming that rather than criticise students for dumbing down, the university can adapt to support those students via more effective forms of study skills tuition. Thus it is assumed that what will rectify the current situation is an awareness of the tutor/student mismatch when it comes to expectations and understandings of what university teaching and learning demands.

Such strategies are laudable and deserve full discussion elsewhere. However, this paper is arguing that in order to fully understand this supposed downward shift and how it is perceived and experienced by the students themselves, we need firstly to consider more fully what it is both we and they mean by ‘learning’. Thus, this paper explores the possibilities of a discursive approach to analysing the learning experience. For example, whilst we will go on to argue that students do adopt particular learning strategies, this does not necessarily need to be seen as a downward trend to passive consumerism and instrumentalism in academic learning. Rather, the strategies and investments in learning which students acknowledge in their talk complicate this picture, whilst our mode of analysis suggests ways in which we could go on to raise questions about tutors’

own assumptions and expectations of this apparent downward shift, both in terms of teaching and learning theory, and in teaching and learning practice.

## **Methodology**

Using focus groups and one-to-one interviews across both projects, we interviewed 51 Arts and Humanities students. We were not aiming for a ‘representative’ sample – if ever that were possible – but to gather as wide a range of ways of talking about learning as possible. Our respondents were from a range of disciplines including Art, Drama, English, History, Media Studies, Sociology and Politics, including some mature and overseas students, and two students repeating their first year.

Focus groups are thought to be by far the most effective method for eliciting “ordinary conversation” (Bloor et al., 2002), as opposed to the more official-seeming and less ‘rich’ questionnaire method. This method seemed most suitable for a project aimed at gaining insight into students’ own experiences in their own vocabularies. Likewise, where practical we wanted to follow less ‘official’ methods of recruiting (via lecturers, for example) and instead used friendship networks (see for example Hermes, 1995) and posters.

Whilst friendship networks were more successful than posters as a recruitment method, due to time and funding limits we did end up recruiting via lectures, where we would give a short, informal talk on the project. We also carried out some one-to-one interviews, when an existing friendship group was not apparent in the sample group, as we were sensitive to the fact some questions could elicit very personal talk about homesickness, relationships back home and so on. During the project, focus groups and single interviews took place during the day in the campus café, as a relatively ‘neutral’ (if often noisy) space.

Drawing on Drew’s study of the key factors affecting learning within the “messiness” of the student experience (2001, p.327) our interview schedule across both projects included five broad areas of discussion (expectations, reflection, learning and teaching, assessments, wellbeing). Our informal interview schedule enabled students to introduce their own take on the topics, in their own words, whilst being sufficiently focussed on the key themes.

Where our study differed from Drew’s is that we adopted a broadly discursive approach to our findings (see Brooks 2002, Jackson et al., 2001; Barker and Brooks 1998). We wanted to map out the ways of talking about student experiences, noting key areas and patterns of talk which recurred across interviews. In doing so we borrowed from Hermes the notion of “interpretive repertoires” (1995, p.3), which “do not exist within each individual as self contained... but as part of a wider social context” (Jackson et al., 2001, p.172). That is, that students’ talk can be seen as drawing on and referring to what we have termed ‘learning modalities’ which are available, publicly acknowledged ways of living and learning at university. We are not suggesting these are student types – indeed, boxing students into personality ‘types’ limits our understanding of the dynamics of student identities – rather, students refer to, identify, acknowledge

and ironise these modalities in their talk. In doing so, they are investing in those modalities in a variety of ways related to their previous experiences of learning, their social identity, their aims and ambitions, and so on, and we would suggest that they do so in various ways at various points of their university experience. Our findings are set out, below.

## **Findings**

Having read and reread transcripts from our interviews, we have arrived, so far, at four key modalities. Each of these is introduced below:

- Active engagement (being a 'good' student).
- Passive engagement (assumed to be negative lack of engagement, but could be read as a conscious decision, based on pre-university modalities of learning).
- Slacker (anti-establishment bravado).
- Consumer (deliberately being passive in order to 'get what you paid for', and/or seeing tutors as providers of a service).

### **'Active engagement' modality**

Students who invested in this modality tended to talk about their preparation as the exception rather than the norm. Thus, they perceived they were investing in a modality shared by the tutor, but not the majority of students:

- *"Because I come to seminars having done the reading and with questions and like, if they haven't done the reading I really think the tutor should just send them home, because..what's the point of them coming."*
- *"I feel really bad for lecturers, they come in prepared for a proper discussion, but no-one's done the reading and no-one says anything so they all just sit there for an hour while the tutor bleeds answers out of them...it's disheartening."*
- *"It's so annoying, you've done the reading and everyone else just sits there and the tutor has to do something so you have a very superficial session."*
- *"The worst seminars are when you're all just sitting there and no-one has done the reading."*

Thus it can be read here that the actively engaged students define themselves as a minority against the more passive majority. This chimes with the current popular thought discussed earlier that universities are 'dumbing down' to accommodate weaker students' superficial learning. There are two significant questions which need asking here. Firstly, has this somewhat elitist perception of a deep/surface learning become not only the popular theme within teaching and learning research, as discussed earlier, but also influential in terms of teaching and learning practice? That is, do current students pick up on their tutors' assumptions that they are taking an instrumental and superficial approach to the task? In which case, we need to consider the ways in which students and tutors invest in learning modalities. Thus further research would investigate tutors' investments in learning modalities. This paper is so far, only half the picture. Secondly, it

causes us to wonder if there are less conventional or traditional modalities of learning which we need to acknowledge and make clear to students in practice, and with which we as tutors need to engage? This leads us on to the second modality.

### **‘Passive engagement’ modality**

- *“I like to attend seminars even if I haven’t prepared or read anything because I always think I’ll learn something...it might inspire me to do the reading.”*
- *“I’ll learn more than I would just sitting about drinking tea!”*
- *“I like to turn up and I do talk even if it’s out my arse.”*
- *“In seminars I’m a passive student, I just don’t get it so when she asks a question I do just sit there with a blank expression on my face.”*

There are three issues to highlight here. Firstly, that ‘passive’ learning is not always ‘unengaged’: students who ‘just sit there’ are making the decision to turn up to seminars in order to be taught something – a contrast to the active engagement modality, but one which arguably corresponds to the dominant modality of current schooling. However, it is too simplistic to assume that this is simply the result of schooling. Such an approach may not fit the ‘deep learning’ model of learning nor perhaps the more traditionalist model of student learning (involving for example, self directed library research), yet it could be seen as a valid and effective way of learning in a mass education system. So, the second issue here is that this modality challenges conventional definitions of ‘learning’.

Finally, drawing on the issues raised by the ‘active engagement modality’, we also need to consider how the current system may implicitly encourage the very kinds of student behaviours and assumptions that we are critiquing. If we as tutors are expecting to find this as the dominant modality, are we going in to seminars and tutorials prepared to teach passive students thus exacerbating, if not engendering, that modality?

### **‘Slacker’ modality**

Discursively, our findings tentatively suggest there is a discourse of ‘slacker bravado’, and we use the term here not pejoratively, but to acknowledge that this is the term used by the students themselves:

- *“I never read books...I just get titles off Amazon and write them down [as a bibliography]. Everyone does it!”*
- *“The most important things at uni – coffee, Red Bull and Pro Plus... I often go to lectures still drunk...but it doesn’t seem to make any difference!”*
- *“We sit about, drink tea, watch telly... I am such an aimless slacker.”*

The ‘slacker culture’ is discursively powerful. Whilst we can argue that students within the academy are seen primarily as learners, the media stereotypes of students as hedonistic slackers are hard to avoid both within popular culture and on campus itself: the cheap alcohol at Student Union ‘student nights’, the ‘drink the bar dry’ end of term traditions and so on. Interestingly, this investment seemed gendered – whilst the female



students ironised or defended themselves against the slacker modality, most – but not all – of the male students interviewed took on this 'slacker talk'.

For the 'actively engaged' students, 'good' experiences of learning were also defined against the 'slacker' modality:

- *"There's definitely a slacker culture here, but I don't get bothered by it myself. I just try and get a good balance."*
- *"The majority of students are so apathetic, just sitting round drinking tea all day, I can't do that."*
- *"I feel I am definitely in the minority, people say 'why aren't you going out you boffin?!' But I don't care!"*
- *"I write notes or queries and you go to seminars and no-one's debating with you or agreeing with you, it's just not worth it."*

And again, this was taken up by students who felt the slacker modality was the mainstream:

- *"I'm swimming against the tide of 'being cool.'"*
- *"I thought the geeks would prevail here! But there's still that 'too cool for school' culture."*

Once again, we can see how such a modality complicates the conventional definitions of learning. It also significantly highlights the need to see 'beyond' the boundaries of the campus when thinking about the student experiences and the factors that affect teaching and learning. For example, we can relate this modality to current, broader educational concerns about the behaviour and achievements of boys throughout the school system (cf. Rowan et al., 2002). We can also relate it to the 'new lad culture' which has been a widely circulating part of British popular cultural discourses since the mid 1990s (cf. Edwards, 1997; Faludi, 2000; Jackson et al., 2001) and in which young men are exhorted to 'have fun' and deride the kind of 'political correctness' seen as the outmoded, humourless attitudes of academics and 'sensitive feminists' (cf. Southwell, 1998). Thus this modality, existing as it does in various forms of popular media aimed at young men in particular, illustrates the need to spend time thinking about the slacker culture and its effect on university life. From a political point of view, we need to think about how and why 'political correctness' is popularly seen in such negative terms<sup>3</sup>. In terms of teaching and learning in practice, we need to address how the emphasis on a certain kind of student lifestyle promoted by 'student nights' and Student Union activities can send mixed messages to students. Students arrive at university with a set of experiences, attitudes, assumptions and perceptions of what 'being a student' entails, which needs to be acknowledged, investigated and addressed in research and teaching.

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<sup>3</sup> For example, students in my tutor groups would use the word 'gay' to describe something weak, pathetic or foolish, and when challenged would explain this as 'ironic'.

### **‘Consumer’ modality**

‘Consumerist’ talk about education did not necessarily involve the ‘passive’ investment in commodified learning as decried by recent debates:

- *“I don’t think of myself as a ‘consumer’ of my course, only in the sense that if you’re being slack and not turning up for stuff it’s stupid because you’re paying for it, so that’s what motivates me.”*

Others saw the consumer modality as specifically opposite to the ‘passive’ modality – for example, one student defined ‘good students’ as “unquestioning blobs....you pay your money and don’t think are you getting your money’s worth”.

As we have argued, it has been widely discussed that contemporary students appear interested only in how to pass exams “without engaging fully or deeply in the processes of learning” (Tinto, 2000, p.5). Yet, interestingly, very few of our respondents identified with this modality. Indeed we would go so far to suggest that given the significant cost of a degree, and this widespread assumption that consumerism is replacing scholarship, it is surprising just how little consumerist talk featured in our interviews. When it did feature, it did so under one of two themes. Firstly, the theme of professionalism, as when students were talking about getting their assignments back:

- *“I like the professional-looking feedback sheet and the contents if they’re detailed and relevant – it’s what we’re paying for after all!”*

And secondly, the theme of dissatisfaction. For example, when tutors were absent, this was seen by some as ‘short changing’ the paying student:

- *“When they cancel a seminar, that’s it, they don’t find a replacement...we said to [our tutor] we’ll have to catch up and he’s like, oh yes we will somehow but it’s unsatisfactory really, we are paying for this.”*
- *“I do think about what it costs and what I get out of it.”*

Thus, we need to consider whether students identify themselves as consumers in practice, or whether this is a discourse they mobilise in order to conceptualise ‘professionalism’ and/or verbalise dissatisfaction. Which leads us to ask, how else would students conceptualise academic ‘professionalism’, and what implications does that have for the student/tutor relationship? What kinds of learning experiences would be seen as ‘good value’ and again, what are the implications? Finally, given the general popular pessimism concerning the ‘commodification’ of learning, we need to ask whether this pessimism is drawing on nostalgic myths of the Good Old Days – a golden age of satisfied, active, intellectually stimulated and stimulating students? Is this a nostalgic modality verbalised by tutors to voice dissatisfaction with current students, just as students draw on it themselves to verbalise their own dissatisfactions?

## **Summary**

This paper has introduced the idea that students make a range of investments in turning up to seminars and lectures: they turn up for a variety of different reasons, which in turn impact on how they talk about themselves as students, how they interact in the seminar, and how they relate to the tutor. These reasons are not simply individual decisions but modalities which individuals draw on and relate to, choosing different modalities for different experiences, for example, at different points of their university career, and in different seminars or with different tutors. These modalities are thus dynamic, and hierarchal, in that certain modalities are valued over others, although the institutionalised hierarchy is not necessarily accepted by the students and vice versa.

In terms of teaching practice, whilst schemes to support students' learning are necessary and laudable, this paper suggests that to support students more effectively we need to spend more time considering what is meant by 'learning'. In terms of pedagogical theory, this paper complicates existing popular notions of learning, and questions the taken-for-granted idea of declining standards. The picture is more complicated than that. Our notion of modalities thus opens the field for a more constructive and less elitist debate in which the notion of 'declining standards' could be defined as a modality itself, one which both student and tutors invest in, identify with, defend themselves against and so on. We suggest further research is needed to investigate tutors' own investments – what modalities do we as tutors draw on, do we assume, anticipate, encourage, reject? Do certain forms of teaching encourage certain modalities and certain forms of investments? Who are we talking to, when we teach? When we walk into the seminar room or the lecture hall, are we expecting to see geeks or slackers, or someone else entirely?

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# Mindful or mindless: do UK student drinking cultures and stereotypes undermine intercultural contact?

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## **Abstract**

*Higher education policy-makers place an increasingly high premium on students acquiring a certain set of intercultural skills to equip them for life after graduation. One component of the wider internationalisation agenda predicts that the very presence of international students on university campuses in the United Kingdom will provide the critical incidents which enable this to occur. However, it is questionable whether this is indeed the case and whether there is really meaningful contact between home and international students.*

*Based on interviews and focus groups involving 100 students at two universities, this paper reports on the ways in which the drinking cultures of students in the United Kingdom impact on the intercultural communication between the two groups. It documents aspects of the night-time social lives of UK students and the role of international students within this, finding that, in reality, contact is very limited and often unplanned.*

*The paper briefly explores the concept of ‘mindfulness’ and asks whether this is at odds with the more ‘mindless’ social situations which students seek, especially early in their academic careers. It also explores the nature of stereotypes around alcohol consumption and whether these also act as barriers to greater communication. The paper concludes that the low levels of intercultural contact are unlikely to yield the skills acquisition which is simultaneously seen as desirable and inevitable, and ends with some initial observations relevant to policy-makers and university managers.*

## **Context: internationalisation and ‘passive xenophobia’**

The last twenty years have seen a rapid growth in the number of international students attending universities in the United Kingdom. Over 300,000 students now choose to study in this way, comprising 13 per cent of the student body and bringing an estimated £2.5 billion into the UK economy (UNITE, 2006). Along with widened participation by home students, this process of ‘internationalisation’ has considerably changed the face of university campuses, providing a more apparently diverse student body.

Policy-makers are keen that students should develop an array of intercultural communication skills and global perspectives in order to contribute to their employability and wider role as citizens (Fielden, 2007). Though increased numbers of international students on our campuses have the potential to provide opportunities for meaningful interaction and intercultural learning, studies by higher education sector bodies suggest that this does not happen spontaneously. UKCOSA's (2004) *Broadening Our Horizons* study reported the views of nearly 5,000 international students in the UK. They found that social links with co-nationals and other international students were more common than with UK students. A large majority would have liked more chances to experience the home culture, while a significant minority reported that they found their UK peers hard to get to know. These findings were supported by UNITE's (2006) *International Student Experience Report*, which was based on 1,025 interviews with UK and international students. Of particular relevance here, only 58 per cent of UK students reported having friends from overseas, while international students' consumption of alcohol was markedly lower.

While there is a growing academic literature around the experiences of international students in the UK (for a comprehensive review, see Caruana & Spurling, 2007), practically no research has been published about the home students' attitudes towards their international colleagues and their experiences of the internationalised university. The literature from other Anglophone countries (e.g. Volet & Ang, 1998; Spencer-Rodgers, 2001; Ward et al, 2005) suggests that interactions are relatively rare, occasionally problematic and that there can be active feelings of threat. Based on the results of an exploratory study in the UK, Peacock & Harrison (forthcoming-a) have described the majority response as one of 'passive xenophobia', where intercultural interactions are generally "low level, incidental and unconnected to wider learning". De Vita (2005) found that mono-cultural workgroups predominate in the classroom.

This paper therefore aims to explore one component of intercultural interaction between UK and international students; namely night-time socialising and the potential role of alcohol as an intercultural barrier. There have been numerous previous studies of alcohol consumption among UK students (see Gill, 2002 for a meta-analysis), but little literature focusing on the cultural and intercultural aspects of this.

## **Methodology**

The data presented in this paper are drawn from an ongoing study at two post-1992 universities in the southwest of England. The study began in late 2006 and aims to explore the social and academic discourse between UK and international students. The participants were second and final year full-time UK undergraduates drawn from 'business studies' and 'creative arts' programmes.

The first stage of the research comprised eight hour-long focus groups with a total of 60 participants. These were used to explore, in general terms, the relationships which the participants had with their international peers. The second stage comprised 40 hour-long one-to-one interviews (with 'business studies' students only) investigating in

more depth their experiences of groupwork and night-time socialising with international students. The participants broadly represented the demographic mix of the wider student population, including a proportion of mature students and students from black or minority ethnic backgrounds.

It should be noted that the dichotomy between UK and international students is in many ways an artificial one, with some UK students demonstrating traits which might be considered more typical of international students (e.g. having English as a second language) and vice versa. Similarly, there are dangers associated with homogenising a very heterogeneous international student population. The research team intends to address these limitations in future work.

### **How do UK students drink alcohol?**

The participants were very aware of a prevailing student stereotype, broadly consisting of someone who paid scant regard to their studies in favour of a social life where alcohol is consumed in large quantities, with hints of associated anti-social behaviour. This was actively reinforced by media images:

*Student 1: Did anyone see Booze Britain <sup>1</sup>?*

*Student 2: Yeah, my friend was on it.*

*Student 3: I saw my housemate on it once – when they put programmes on like that it does make it look worse, but if you're drunk you don't realise what you look like.*

*[focus group]*

Such media portrayals are ubiquitous. It has recently been noted that *Hollyoaks*<sup>2</sup> has the highest presence of alcohol of any UK television programme (Matthews, 2007).

This stereotype was indeed represented within the study, but only as a small minority (perhaps 10-20 per cent). They generally met their own definitions of 'binge drinkers' and typically consumed large quantities of alcohol on at least two occasions per week.

For the majority, the 'stereotypical student' was a phase which they had passed through during their first year. They described their friendship groups forming very early in their academic careers, usually during the first few weeks and often around housing arrangements. Alcohol formed a key part of this bonding process in most instances and students reflected about this period of their university life being "crazy" or "full-on".

These students had subsequently settled into a more restrained pattern of drinking between their first and final years, which showed considerable consistency between participants. Events where alcohol was consumed had dwindled in number and the amount at each event had lessened. This was partly attributed to increased academic

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<sup>1</sup> A UK television programme which visits a different city each week and documents the drinking cultures there in a particularly lurid fashion.

<sup>2</sup> A popular UK teenage soap opera set around a higher education college.



pressure or part-time work commitments, but also a sense of moving on to a new stage in life with “more mature” social activities, such as communal cooking, sports or appreciation of the arts:

*Perhaps I was more social in the first and second year because obviously there was less importance of those years. Say, you know, go out, two or three times a week but as you get old – perhaps a bit more mature – then it kind of goes down towards your final year.*

*[interview]*

Alcohol was still consumed regularly in small quantities, but where there were “big nights” (e.g. a birthday), larger amounts were involved. It was notable that almost all these interviewees considered themselves to have a below average alcohol intake compared to their peers (McAlaney & McMahan, 2007).

At the other end of the spectrum, a minority of students (around 5-15 per cent) did not consume alcohol to any degree or, if they did, it was not with other students. These tended to be students who lived at home and therefore away from the general student milieu, or those who travelled back to the parental home at weekends. The mature and black and ethnic minority participants also tended to have lower consumption levels, although there were exceptions.

A particular feature of the drinking cultures discussed by participants were different forms of ritualisation of social events. At the most basic level was the act of drinking in a private home prior to going out, within tight-knit, insular and persisting friendship groups. More complex examples included the use of fancy dress themes, dressing in particular clothing, visiting multiple drinking venues and involvement in competitive ‘games’. The apogee of this phenomenon appeared to be ‘pub golf’ – a game mentioned by several participants – incorporating aspects of all these ritualised behaviours. The researchers also noted a distinct meta-language around the student drinking culture, referring to certain types of alcohol, special offers and drinking styles.

Overall, there was a mix of pride and shame about the stereotype of the UK student drinker and their role within or around it. Participants were generally convinced that UK students consumed more alcohol (and in more hedonistic ways) than other groups, who “couldn’t keep up”. Smart & Osborne (2000) offer some support for this view, although they found that the per capita consumption by UK students was actually lower than for some other European nations, while Hibell et al (2004) found it to be above average, but falling. On the one hand, this was seen as a mark of freedom from parental influence, virile adulthood and the pursuit of libertarian values – as well as meeting behavioural expectations. Drunken incidents (which frequently had a sexual component) were seen as embarrassing, although humorous, and the source of future anecdotes which contributed further to social bonding :

*You know, like, the next day everyone talks about how they were and how much fun they had because they were so drunk.*

[focus group]

*Because I got wasted yesterday - I really got wasted and we talk about things like that, which is our culture.*

[interview]

On the other hand, there was a sense of concern from some participants, about how this appeared to observers and outsiders; a disappointment that the student stereotype was not more sophisticated and that it didn't reflect the reality for many students :

*The amount of people that think that you don't do any work and it's, like, obviously there are students that do that. But you're targeted in order to feel like you have to go out every night. The amount of people in the first year that I know that came in and said things like, "I got really pissed and then ended up sleeping with this guy... Oh, but that's what I'm supposed to be doing, isn't it, because I'm a student?" It's, like, 'What is wrong with you? Did you have a lobotomy on the way in?' You don't have to do it because people think that's what you do when you're a student, but loads of people say that.*

[focus group]

### **Are international students socially involved?**

Interviewees were asked to what extent international students were involved in their night-time social activities. In most instances, the answer was rarely, if ever. Only a small minority of participants (perhaps 20 per cent) could refer to regular intercultural social contact. This was particularly true of those students living away from the university setting or travelling home every weekend. In these instances, their social life was geared around pre-existing friendship groups which did not feature international students at all.

A number of participants referred to their current or historic experiences of living with international students in university accommodation. While they felt that relations were cordial, it was rare that they would socialise together. Similarly, international students were sometimes invited as part of social events geared around seminar groups and occasionally attended. They described the international students tending to spend their free time with co-nationals, often in the context of shared meals. Where an international student did spend time with UK students, this was considered exceptional and noteworthy, with a degree of credit being accorded to them for their more adventurous spirit:

*There's this one girl in our [seminar] group and she didn't want to go out. She didn't want to drink but she wanted to join in the seminar activity which was quite nice, and halfway through the night she came up to me and said, 'Is it ok if I go?' Obviously no problems - I just appreciate the efforts she's gone to,*

*you know. She's not, 'I'm from a different country, I'm going to stay in'. She's making an effort with us ... it was quite nice.*

*[focus group]*

Some participants noted that they had tried at certain points to involve international students, but had desisted (perhaps with a degree of relief) after what they saw as repeated rebuffs.

International (predominantly European, Anglophone and South American) students were relatively often described as coincidentally being “seen out” in the same social spaces – e.g. bars or nightclubs. When this occurred, their company was enjoyed and they temporarily became part of the wider friendship circle. However, this did not generally lead to planned contact in the future :

*If I see them out we chat, have a bit of a dance, but [it's] not arranged – just if we see them, stand and have a chat.*

*[interview]*

A minority of participants (around 10 per cent) did have significantly stronger ties with international students. In some instances they were part of a friendship group, but were partly marked out by their low alcohol consumption or total abstinence. In these instances, socialising was based around dinner visits to their homes. In others, they had full access to alcohol-based socialising on a par with the UK students :

Interviewer: *Going back to [...] the international friends that you have got – do they kind of fit in with the general student life?*

Student: *Very much so, you would not notice [them] acting any different to be honest.*

*[interview]*

However, this was not always the case. One male UK student had formed a close personal bond with a Chinese student through their mutual enjoyment of martial arts. They did socialise together, but this was not without cultural difficulties:

*I was at my brother's party: I took my Chinese friend and, you know, he chatted to a few other people, but he was mainly just chatting to me, and so he did not feel like staying there too long, where as everyone else stayed there until, I don't know how long in the morning, but we stayed until about 12 o'clock or so.*

*[interview]*

### **Understanding intercultural anxiety**

The overall absence of international students from night-time socialising was discussed with the participants, exploring both their reaction to this fact and their explanations for it. For many, it was not something which had explicitly occurred to them before. Some offered a defensive or dismissive response by explaining that they “didn't have a

problem with international students, but it just didn't work out that way". Others were more reflective, with a notable minority reacting with a degree of hostility to what they perceived to be a cultural threat :

*[International students] have to make the choice at the end of the day. They have to accept that they are coming over here, it's a different culture and if they don't like it, they're going to have to accept it or they are going to be isolated... The culture's not going to change to suit them.*

*[focus group]*

The more reflective participants tended to respond that they simply did not feel that international students would want to socialise with UK students; "I just don't think they would enjoy it much" because "they're not binge drinkers, the rest of the world". UK student alcohol culture was inherently excluding as they felt that international students generally drank much less and in different ways :

*The British... do get quite drunk. If that's not what you do in your culture I can see that would be really off-putting – quite daunting because we're all, like, quite brash.*

*[focus group]*

Similarly, another explained :

*I met a student from Portugal and she said it was really strange because [...] there was always drink involved and if you went out for a meal it was drink, and she said at home they only ever drank on a weekend and even then... It was such a different culture to come over here.*

*[focus group]*

They also noted that their social events tended to rely heavily on shared histories within the friendship groups, often involving previous occasions. There was therefore a form of recursive exclusion, whereby friendships were reinforced over time by an accumulation of shared incidents which were largely meaningless to outsiders. Perhaps most fundamentally, international students were rarely considered to be part of even the widest friendship groups and were simply not considered when social events were planned.

Peacock & Harrison (forthcoming-a) and Harrison & Peacock (2007) explore the concept of 'mindfulness' in regard to the interactions between UK and international students. Contact is not straightforward and UK students experience a degree of anxiety when it occurs. Communication can be stilted by language barriers and a lack of shared cultural reference points, with significant scope for misunderstandings. There is a strong fear of causing offence through a lack of cultural understanding or a deficient sense of 'political correctness'. This is amplified where the contact is public, where such incidents could be interpreted by UK peers as being "racist" or "stupid". 'Mindfulness' thus becomes the affective state in which UK students approach their

international colleagues. It requires careful listening skills, patience to deal with misunderstandings, active attempts to find common interests and a common vocabulary, a consciousness around simplicity of language and suppression of feelings of cultural inadequacy. It is a demanding and uncomfortable state which does not commend itself to some individuals; “it’s so much easier to go with what’s easy”, as one participant explained.

So how do alcohol and UK student drinking cultures affect ‘mindfulness’? Participants in this study felt that it was considerably more difficult and less attractive to be mindful when socialising. One of the very purposes of alcohol consumption was to relax, have fun and lose inhibitions (Plant & Plant, 2006), which is predicated to some degree on situations and company which are familiar and non-challenging. Participants noted that the reliance on cultural artefacts (e.g. music, film or comedy) within their conversations tended to be greater when socialising where alcohol was involved. Many of the social spaces used by UK students are very loud and this adds an additional barrier to understanding, by making careful listening more problematic:

*When we’re drunk it’s a lot more difficult to understand ’cos that makes everything ten times more... like humour and like taking the piss out of people is suddenly like ten times worse when you’re drunk and then it’s like a real culture difference, if [international students] don’t understand that.*

*[focus group]*

A conscious decision to be mindful was not considered to be compatible with higher levels of alcohol consumption where the very object of the event was to forget social conventions; in other words, to become ‘mindless’:

*When you go out and get drunk, you’re just focusing on the club or whatever and having fun with mates – you know, dancing or whatever – and you do forget about it ‘cos I think alcohol does let you relax a bit [...] whereas if you went bowling or something you’d be probably thinking I should be home working rather than doing this.*

*[interview]*

Around a third of students said that they had experience of doing things when drunk which they were subsequently embarrassed by. There was a sense, discussed in a number of focus groups, in which they had a fear of being judged by people attending who were less drunk or more mature than they were (international students tend to be older than UK students in the same classes). A further development of this theme arose among a focus group of students who drank alcohol more sparingly, where they were concerned about the overall image presented by UK students to the wider community. They felt that students who drank alcohol to excess were betraying their own sense of cosmopolitan sophistication and thereby making positive intercultural interaction more difficult. Why would international students want to socialise with their UK counterparts when the prevailing stereotype was so poor?

## Conclusions and recommendations

The foremost conclusion of this study has been that UK and international students tend to inhabit very separate night-time social spaces. There is very limited evidence for meaningful social contact and the majority of UK students could not point to any time spent with their international peers outside of the classroom or accommodation setting. Alcohol appeared to play a key part in this. UK students were convinced that international students would neither understand nor enjoy the drinking cultures which were familiar to them. There was a tacit acceptance of the fact that British people drank more alcohol than other nationalities, whether this was a source of pride or shame. Many of the UK students in this study felt awkward about the idea of socialising with international students when drinking because of the heightened cultural and linguistic barriers which this presented. They contrasted mindlessness with the mindful behaviours needed to have safe and rewarding interactions with international students. This was further exacerbated by the ritualistic components of their drinking culture, with its distinct dress, behaviours and idioms.

There was an awareness amongst students of the different models of social bonding which predominated in other countries (Heath, 2000). Reference was made, for example, to European ‘café culture’ and the role of collective cooking and shared meals in South East Asian cultures. These models were not rejected and some students had participated. It was noted that while alcohol was present, it was not the main focus of the social occasion. This wasn’t always a comfortable experience:

*I went to Germany a couple of months ago actually and met my cousins and [...] they got all their friends around and they all drank sort of coffee with biscuits – and I just felt like... ‘where’s the vodka?’*

*[focus group]*

The participants were keen to establish their drunken identities in terms of being “happy drunks” and “harmless enough”, in contrast to more aggressive or sinister manifestations. They did not perceive that international students might nevertheless be less than entirely comfortable with public intoxication, especially those coming from countries where it was culturally associated with violence, class distinctions or power relationships.

It was noted that the participants described a shift in their alcohol consumption between their first and final years. Night-time socialising was more important earlier in their time at university and was seen as particularly important in the context of establishing friendship groups. With international students effectively excluded from these activities at this early stage, friendship groups were generally formed without them. These groups were reinforced by an introspective narrative which placed a high premium on shared experiences, especially relating to alcohol-centred events. Even as alcohol consumption declined through second and subsequent years in favour of a more mature approach to socialising, international students were not rehabilitated into the friendship groups.

Peacock & Harrison (forthcoming-b) have demonstrated that, for UK students, intercultural contact in the classroom is limited, anxiety-causing and 'risky'. This study suggests that intercultural social contact follows a similar pattern, with UK students inhabiting distinct social spaces from their international colleagues; even if they are occasionally co-located in the same venues. It is therefore difficult to see where the contact and environment necessary for the development of the intercultural skills prized by policy-makers can come from. Similarly, some international students report a degree of disquiet about their limited integration into the host culture and this jeopardises their own student experience and learning, and hence the reputation of UK higher education overseas.

In terms of recommendations for policy-makers and university managers, a number of initial observations have struck the research team:

- Firstly, that friendship circles developed in the classroom and in housing are often continued into the social sphere. At present these are generally mono-cultural, but there were counter-examples of where strong intercultural relationships had been struck up initially in these situations. Both the classroom and housing are spaces which can be proactively 'managed' by university authorities.
- Secondly, that cultural reference points are an important component in social interaction among UK students, raising questions about how the home culture might best be shared with international students, both pre- and on arrival. A better appreciation of these social touchstones among international students is likely to support better intercultural interaction.
- Thirdly, the very stereotype of the 'student drinker' acts as a barrier to intergroup relations, affecting the way in which the two groups of students view themselves and each other and shaping their assumptions about the way in which contact might occur. Action could be taken at a number of levels to question and counter this stereotype with both groups, including through university marketing materials or students' union alcohol policies.

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# Negotiating an identity in English: the discursive construction and reconstruction of Chinese students

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## **Abstract**

*This paper explores the international student experience in terms of the construction of identity. Based on the preliminary findings of a British Academy funded project, it focuses on Chinese-speaking students attending a UK university. Through interview-based case studies it documents the cultural, linguistic and academic challenges that these students face, as well as their strategies of self-presentation. The conclusions offer fresh insights into the day-to-day lives of the students, providing a more nuanced image of 'the Chinese learner' than is outlined in much of the existing literature. The paper also suggests important ways in which universities can enhance support for these members of the student body.*

## **Introduction**

In recent years international students have made an increasing contribution to the British higher education sector (Wachter, 1999; Smart, 2001; De Wit, 2002; British Council, 2004). One of the most notable developments has been a growth in recruitment of students from the Chinese speaking world, who have become the largest group (Zweig & Chen, 1996). It is of vital importance for British universities to appreciate the needs of these students, not only because of the responsibility of inclusive education but also because their satisfaction is linked to the revenue of British HE and its reputation in the global market.

However, to date little research has sought to investigate the diverse experiences of Chinese-speaking students. A British Academy funded project (HD081X) was designed to address this gap. Through ethnographic interviews involving the elicitation of personal narratives, the project explores the students' experiences of British academic life. This paper presents some preliminary findings from the project, focusing specifically on the contrast between the stereotypical identity that is imposed upon them by the host institution and the multivariate identities that the students themselves embody.

## **Perspectives on 'the Chinese learner'**

In academic discourse there is a strong tendency to stereotype students from the

Chinese-speaking world. In seeking to isolate the attributes of these students, academic staff, international offices and professional development specialists often draw upon the literatures of intercultural communication and comparative organisational behaviour (Brick, 1991; Hofstede & Hofstede, 2004; Hofstede & Bond, 1988). Accounts of 'Confucian Heritage Cultures' have resulted in a relatively consistent image of East Asian learners as: passive; reticent in class; teacher dependent; and exhibiting reproductive rather than critical or speculative learning styles (Ballard, 1996; Flowerdew, 1998; Atkinson, 1999). Although some authors attempt a more nuanced perspective, the discourse of 'the Chinese learner' (itself a mass generalisation) nevertheless assumes a deterministic relationship between the perceived features of 'Chinese culture' and the behaviours of individual students (cf. Watkins & Biggs 1996, 2001; Jin & Cortazzi, 2006).

However, in recent years a growing literature has challenged the stereotypical construct of non-Western students (Kubota, 1999; Kumaravadivelu, 2003; Phan, 2004; Clark & Gieve, 2006; Grimshaw, 2007a). Pennycook (1998) sees this as a product of residual colonial discourses. Drawing upon Said's (1978) thesis on Orientalism, he argues that colonialism generated a series of dichotomies that presented the 'West' in self-flattering opposition to the 'Rest'. Behind these colonial constructs of 'Self' and 'Other' lies the undeclared assumption of racial difference as cultural inferiority. Pennycook illustrates how these persistent notions constantly resurface in the public domain and feed into the dominant discourse of international education (1998).

Orientalism is part of the broader cultural phenomenon of Otherisation; i.e. the tendency to "over-generalize, stereotype and reduce the people we communicate with to something different or less than they are" (Holliday et al, 2004, p. xv). This has been problematised within the field of international English language education, where the prevailing professional-academic discourse perpetuates a "negatively reduced image of the foreign Other" (Holliday, 2005, p.1). Students for whom English is an additional language are often subject to 'native-speakerism': a form of discrimination which operates in much the same way as racism and sexism (ibid.; Grimshaw, 2007b).

Ultimately, the key distinction is between an essentialised and a non-essentialised view of culture (Holliday et al., 2004). The former assumes that people belong to homogeneous, mutually exclusive cultures; and that their behaviour is defined by their membership of these cultures. In contrast, the latter, which is associated with progressive, critical forms of social research, sees culture as a 'social force' and each person as belonging to a multiplicity of groupings (relating to region, ethnicity, social class, profession, etc.). Thus, "the world is made up of a vast complex of shifting, overlapping, swirling, combining and splitting cultures" (Holliday, 2005, pp. 23-24).

This distinction has important implications for our understanding of students from the Chinese-speaking world. The construct of 'the Chinese learner' as a 'reduced Other' is a product of "essentialized binarism" (Lin, 2008,p.vii); while the alternative, non-essentialist perspective views Chinese students as complex and creative subjects who display a variety of cultural forms and behaviours.

This also impacts significantly on our conceptualisation of identity. From a non-essentialist perspective, identity is constantly negotiated through communication. These negotiations are unequal, for “it is the powerful groups who have more resources and capital to construct powerful identities for themselves and dictate the rules of the identity game to subordinated groups” (Lin, 2008, p.2). But there is always a tension between imposed and created identities (Holliday et al, 2004). Individuals are able to assert agency by manipulating the cultural resources at their disposal, selecting from a range of options (dress codes, rules of etiquette, belief systems, artefacts, etc.) in order to achieve their purposes in specific contexts (ibid. p.13). A convenient metaphor is that of a pack of playing cards. Social actors are engaged in a sophisticated game of interaction in which, at any given time, one of them may play a specific identity card in order to achieve a particular effect (ibid. p.18).

Language plays an integral role in these processes. A person with limited proficiency in the medium of interaction will inevitably find it more difficult to express his or her identity effectively. Pellegrino Aveni (2005) explores this issue in terms of the study-abroad experience. Drawing on the symbolic interactionist tradition, she investigates the construction and presentation of ‘self’ by (American) international students within a (Russian) second language environment. Her study reveals that the overseas students are frequently frustrated by the inability to articulate their thoughts or feelings effectively in the language of the host culture. They are unable to joke; they cannot respond when being patronised; and they complain that a ‘false persona’ is being imposed upon them. The author subsequently examines the strategies they develop in order to overcome these challenges and develop a ‘self’ that is better adapted to their new context.

### **The research**

The preceding literature highlights some of the key issues which might affect Chinese-speaking students overseas. However, the research presented here gives particular priority to the voices of such students, by eliciting accounts of their everyday experiences on and around a British university campus. The methodology was qualitative and interpretive, involving a series of emergent questions. The data presented in this paper relates to one of those questions: How do the students construct and maintain their sense of identity in a British academic context?

The study involved case studies of 20 students from Mainland China and Taiwan studying at the University of Bath. The participants (14 female and six male) were following one-year full time master’s programmes in a range of disciplines: biology, marketing, interpreting, economics, management, education, electrical engineering, finance, accounting and sociology.

The data were generated by means of ethnographic interviews (cf. Hammersley & Atkinson, 1995) that took place at regular intervals over a period of 15 months, incorporating the academic year 2006-2007. These interviews were conducted by the principal investigator and/or a Chinese research assistant. Because the study focused

on the daily lives of the students, it seemed natural for the interviews to take place in non-instructed settings, such as coffee bars and halls of residence. In some cases the interviews were supplemented by email correspondence.

The main medium of interaction was Putonghua (Mandarin Chinese). This distinguished the study from most previous ones in the literature. The participants were empowered by being able to communicate in their first language, as this allowed them a greater range of expression. It also facilitated rapport, thereby enabling more fruitful field relations. The extracts in this paper have been translated into English. Some code switching took place, though this was always initiated by the interviewee. It generally involved words or phrases that the participants found easier or more natural to express in English, such as academic or technical terms.

The study followed the steps of the ethnographic research cycle, as described by Spradley (1980). This provided a systemic and coherent overall strategy for data generation, but also allowed sufficient flexibility for the pursuit of emergent themes. By following the participants through the entire cycle of their master's programmes it was possible to trace patterns of development and identify significant milestones.

When interpreting the data the researchers made a particular effort to identify member categories of description; i.e. we allowed the participants to describe their experiences in their own terms. The analysis also took account of the common tendency towards essentialism. We made frequent use of the device of 'bracketing'. That is, we sought to put aside the preconceptions and the 'easy answers' that are characteristic of essentialist accounts of the world. Instead, we were guided by this basic principle: "While respecting whatever people say about their own culture, take what they say as evidence of what they wish to project rather than as information about where they come from" (Holliday et al., 2004 p.48).

### **Results: some emergent categories**

Although the analysis of data is ongoing, certain categories relating to identity construction are evident. One major recurrent theme is the notion of study abroad as a process of self improvement. Many participants stated that their motivation for coming to the UK was to acquire a qualification that they could use for 'beating on doors' (*qiao men zhuan*) when seeking a better job in their home country. Several others aimed to develop linguistic skills, stressing in particular that 'British English has high status'; or to gain experience of another culture (e.g. "I thought this 'international' background would do me good in the future"). Some saw overseas study as a means of gaining face (e.g. "My father saw his friends' children study abroad, and so ..."). Most were aware that the study abroad experience would be challenging. In summary, these Chinese-speaking students were engaged in a conscious 'reconstruction of the self'.

However, they also experienced some disappointments. Despite their initial expectations of an intercultural experience, several commented on the social distance between themselves and Western students. One interviewee remarked: "To be

honest, we are not be able to get close... They don't talk to us." British students seemed preoccupied with their own activities and showed little interest in their non-Western classmates. One participant stated: "I guess everyone walking in the campus would very much notice that international students are being segregated" (email correspondence).

Some participants attributed this social distance to differences in culturally-based norms of interaction:

*I just feel it is more tiring to do group work with students from other countries... We have had some unpleasant experiences... But when Chinese students get together, we all have a common understanding about how long we will take to complete the task, how we should divide up the task, and so on.*

The sense that it was more efficient to deal with members of one's cultural in-group extended to university support services. One interviewee explained that, when needing help from the computing help desk, "we wait until the Chinese assistant is on duty".

Departments and individual members of staff appeared to vary in terms of efforts towards integration, some organising extra-curricular social events. However, some interviewees reported cases of exclusion:

*I do feel something different, that is, the way Western lecturers treat Western students and Asian students. For example, our department was making a leaflet which introduces our courses... The department only asked Western students' opinions, while neglecting ours. When they needed some pictures of students, they only asked Western students again. Not one of the students they asked was Asian. I had never experienced this kind of thing before; but when it happened, I felt very uncomfortable. It is a kind of discrimination. Or, at least, they didn't respect our opinions.*

When discussing their induction into university life and the people to whom they turned for help or advice, many of the interviewees mentioned the role of informal support networks composed of fellow students. To some extent this was seen as a reproduction of the 'classmate'/'countryman' system which occurs in Chinese universities, often attributed to prolonged companionship and notions of group loyalty (cf. Grimshaw, 2007a). However, it was also explained by a lack of awareness of the support services available in British universities; or, more commonly, the assumption that, for cultural and linguistic reasons, it was simply not efficient to deal with these services.

Statements about the approachability of university staff varied greatly between accounts. In some departments informal orders had developed so as to compensate for the

aloofness of academic staff:

Researcher: *How about when you have some difficulties in your studies? Do you ask your friends or classmates?*

Student: *Mainly I will try to solve it myself first. If I can't, I will ask the PhD students in the lab. If they don't know the answer, I will ask my lecturers. But I think mainly it is PhD students who help me most... Tutors seldom appear in the lab.*

Language related issues were another major category. English language proficiency was seen by many as the major issue for Chinese-speaking students. One stated: "As long as we have strong language skills, we can manage the other aspects". Another commented that, in fact, "the course content is not difficult at all, compared with that taught in a Chinese university". The real challenge was reading, writing, following lectures and contributing to seminars in English. The frustration of being unable to express themselves clearly had a strong affective impact on some students:

*It was so tiring and stressful to study here. I have never been like this. It was mainly the language barrier. For example, I spent two weeks to write an essay and got a mark of 60 per cent. But a British student spent a few days writing a very similar essay and got 80 per cent. It was so frustrating. I felt what I did was in vain, and so began to lack confidence.*

At the end of the year some participants acknowledged they had overestimated the extent to which their English would improve. Some attributed this to the lack of interaction with members of the host community. They continued to use English only in limited contexts, such as the seminar room or the refectory. Though the perception is difficult to confirm, one marketing student even claimed that: "My spoken English has become worse, because I speak it less frequently in the UK than when I am in China".

In contrast, an interesting realisation for some was the increasing usefulness of Chinese (especially Mandarin) as a lingua franca:

*Most of our classmates are from Chinese-speaking countries. Even people from Malaysia can speak Putonghua too. We all speak Putonghua... My friend and I decided to communicate in English. But gradually we gave up, because we found it weird to speak to our own friends in English.*

Another recurrent theme was the under-representation and misrepresentation of Chinese cultures. Some interviewees commented on the scarcity of up-to-date library resources relating to their home countries, although assignments required them "to support [their] arguments with evidence from a context with which [they were] familiar". Others commented on the influence of the British media in shaping people's perceptions of China. Reports concentrated on a limited range of issues, especially human rights and the environment, while failing to reflect the diversity of views within

Chinese society or the efforts being made to resolve the problems. The interviewees were particularly disappointed when lecturers illustrated points with negative examples from China. In contrast to these generalisations, the interviews contained much discussion of regional differences, social class, educational background, and various other distinctions of which British people remained unaware.

Whilst the imposition of reduced identities was a problem, some participants also acknowledged that they stereotyped themselves. Some did this as a response to being in an unfamiliar environment and feeling the need to 'close ranks'. Some admitted they autostereotyped because this appealed to their tutors' taste for exoticised accounts of the 'East'. Others did so for strategic reasons; e.g. claiming inadequacies in their previous education in order to make excuses for underachievement. One education student resigned herself to accepting a reduced identity simply because it was the easiest option. Her dissertation supervisor had enthusiastically recommended some references "about Chinese education". She found these to be out of date, inappropriate to her context (she was from Taiwan), and relating to students of the wrong age group. But in order to avoid offence, and because she lacked alternatives, she eventually based her literature review on these sources.

## **Conclusions**

This project, despite its small scale, has yielded a richness of data that has yet to be fully explored. The preliminary findings suggest that for the participants life at a British university was a character-building experience in more ways than one. While it represented an opportunity to reconstruct the self through the acquisition of skills and knowledge, it involved much anxiety due to linguistic and cultural issues. The data also confirm that other forms of construction and positioning were at play, including the persistence of Orientalist stereotypes within everyday academic discourses. The participants responded to these challenges by various means, including 'strategic essentialism' (cf. Lin, 2008). Meanwhile, it is noteworthy that, in their willingness to accept the packaged realities supplied to them by their Chinese-speaking students, academic staff were complicit in the processes of otherisation and reduction.

This has serious implications for British universities. Firstly, it is vital to acknowledge the complexity and dynamism of our students' cultures. This should be reflected in the provision of academic, administrative and pastoral services. Although some institutions already provide staff with training in intercultural communication, we need to ensure that this training encourages participants to view culture as difference, encompassing ethnicity, social class, gender and other dimensions, besides nationality (Kramsch, 1993, pp. 205-206). The training should also address culture as an interpersonal process, rather than presenting and prescribing "cultural facts and behaviours" as if they were "fixed, normative phenomena" (ibid.). For suggestions, see Holliday et al (2004).

This study also highlights the urgent need to reassess the validity of current English language placement tests, as well as current methods of in-session support. In doing so, universities should take advice from specialists in the fields of TESOL and applied



linguistics. For more extensive discussion of these issues, see Edwards et al (2007).

Future research can apply the methodology of the present study to larger scale projects involving cross-university collaboration and international students from other backgrounds. Since one of the major findings was the role of informal support networks, the conceptual frameworks of future projects might be informed by sociocultural theory, specifically the literatures of “communities of practice” (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998) and “funds of knowledge” (Gonzalez et al., 2004). Through this enhanced understanding, sociologists of higher education may contribute to the formation of a truly international academic community.

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# Lone parents as higher education students

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## **Abstract**

*This paper focuses on how the personal experience of lone parents who become students informs their learning and experience of university life. Longitudinal qualitative research with a sample of 79 lone parents studying at a range of UK higher education institutions (HEIs) demonstrates the powerful impact personal experience has upon successful and satisfying higher education completion for this group of learners. The research found personal experience to impact upon university life across a range of causes and effects. Work on the conflicting demands of the family and university as 'greedy institutions', each making insatiable claims on individual members' time and energies, is particularly relevant (Acker, 1980; Edwards, 1993). The paper explores the relevance of lone parents' wider lives in particular their experience of housing, mental health, social inclusion/isolation, family ties, friendships, employment, on-line social spaces and leisure time.*

## **Background**

Lone parents' experiences of HE are contemporarily relevant given their status as one of the non-traditional student groups targeted through the government's drive to widen participation. The changing labour force needs of the globalised economy demand a widening of HE participation (Naidoo and Callender, 2000). Changing demographics mean fewer school leavers and greater need to attract non-traditional student groups (Gallagher, Richards and Locke, 1993; Edwards, 1993).

According to a National Audit Office report, one in five HE students in Britain drops out before completing their course (Lipsett, 2007), with funds 'wasted' on every student failing to complete. Tensions exist between the widening participation agenda and student retention, given that mature and working-class students have lower completion rates (Yorke, 2001), with student parents particularly susceptible (Hands et al., 2007). It is in the financial interest of the HE sector to research and identify 'non-traditional' student experience in order to avoid 'wastage' by putting in place appropriate support. The HE sector also has a responsibility to safeguard the interests of the non-traditional, and often vulnerable students it engages with through widening participation strategies. HE engagement frequently entails substantial costs to lone parent students, including personal sacrifices, debt, leaving jobs, compromising time with families, and placing

children in childcare. Mature students' frequently lacking self-esteem and confidence have been well-documented, with gender, class and ethnicity further significant (Murphy and Roopchand, 2003). This research shows lone parents to be frequently lacking academic confidence because of negative schooling experiences and long educational gaps. Existing research on lone parents has found them to suffer low self-esteem (Greif, 1992). In this context, the HE sector has a responsibility not to further damage vulnerable students' confidence by setting them up for almost inevitable failure through lack of support.

A further dimension to the relevant contemporary context is the governmental agenda of utilising compulsion to return lone parents to employment, as identified in the Leitch (2006) and Freud (2007) reports. One in four British children are raised by lone parents (Policy Research Institute, 2007), and UK lone parent employment lags behind much of Europe (Bradshaw and Millar, 2007). Lone parents are disproportionately low skilled compared to other parents, particularly in the UK compared to other European countries (Millar and Rowlingson, 2001). The UK cost of childcare is disproportionately high compared to much of Europe (Klett-Davies, 2007; Ward, 2005). Hence often only well-paid work is viable once childcare costs are considered (Horne and Hardie, 2002). It is significant that lone parents have the same outgoings as two parent families in terms of housing, bills and childcare, but only one income. To achieve well-paid work, lone parents must gain the qualifications they lack (Horne and Hardie, 2002). The research referred to in this paper demonstrates the complex cost-benefit evaluations lone parents make of the benefits of providing for children financially against the disadvantages of being apart from them, (also observed by Ford with regard to employment, 1996). Ford's analysis can be usefully applied to education. If the benefits appear too distant, or costs to family wellbeing too high, lone parents will either not engage with study initially, or will exit early.

Acker's (1980) and Edwards' (1993) work on the family and university as *greedy institutions* is particularly relevant, arguing the difficulty of juggling commitments as each makes insatiable demands on the individual's primary commitment. Edwards highlights the further tension that both family and university are task-driven rather than time-driven commitments (Edwards, 1993, p. 64), hence within each, tasks must be continued until they are completed, no matter how long this takes.

Also relevant is Mansour's work on lone parents managing constraints rather than overcoming barriers to engage with employment. Mansour sees 'barriers' discourse as problematic in implying that employment engagement problems can be overcome permanently (2005, p.1). Hence if childcare is the barrier, providing a childcare place removes it. In truth, lone parents must continually renegotiate childcare issues. Mansour's observations can usefully be applied to HE participation. HEIs have a responsibility to acknowledge the constraints that non-traditional students must negotiate.

### **Research strategy**

A self-selecting sample of 79 participants was achieved through the research website. Being active online was a requisite of participation, since data was collected solely via

email. Participants were emailed open-ended qualitative prompts, based on the model of the Mass Observation Archive housed at the University of Sussex. Fortnightly prompts over a period of twelve months covered different topics, including finances and support, each incorporating many open-ended questions. Participants could answer from home in their own time (a benefit for lone parents with stretched time and limited childcare, Mann, 2000, p.17). They could respond in as much detail as they wanted, focusing on aspects of each prompt that they were most drawn to, and could catch up on missed prompts. The majority of participants eventually replied to all prompts, although response length varied widely. A large volume of data was produced, and analysed using CAQDAS (Computer Assisted Qualitative Data Analysis Software). Participants often described lone parenthood as lonely, and valued the opportunity for social contact the research provided.

## Findings

A key area in which lone parents' wider lives impacted upon HE experience was in terms of family ties, with help received from family being particularly significant. In most cases participants' own parents or extended family enabled lone parents to study by caring for children, providing financial assistance and emotional support. However family could also drain resources, including caring for elderly or infirm parents, or ill children. Participants were often geographically bound by family support, and leaving this for a university place could cause hardship. This was particularly significant given that lone parents reported much of their socialising to take place with family. Many described loneliness, it often being difficult to meet people as a lone parent:

*I have not moved house to go to university and I definitely would not have moved out of my area to attend an institution – this is mainly attributable to my childcare provision and having my family close by if needed.*

(F11, aged 25, one child aged four, 1-year f/t PG Diploma in Law)

Providing a safety-net of support, the extended family frequently appeared to plug a gap in formal provision, raising questions around the disadvantages for those lacking supportive families to fall back upon.

In addition to family support, friendships were central to university experience. These were frequently a source of support, but also perceived as a drain on stretched resources of time, attention and support giving. Hence friendships were sometimes retreated from in order to focus on studies, children, paid work, and participants' own health and well-being. Friendships predating HE were particularly significant for lone parents who struggled to fit in and forge friendships at university:

*Having only lived in the area a year and a half we are still settling in, making friends, the only friends I have made are through the school or my children's activities and they are more acquaintances, part of moving away from where we'd lived our whole lives was leaving behind all the friends we had but I had to look at the future and what I wanted for our lives in the future.*

(M2, two children under 14, Year 2)

Friendships like these outside university carry implications for lone parent HE students in light of the work of Wilcox et al. on the importance of university friendships in providing support for studies and contributing to positive academic outcomes (2005, p.707). Lone parents often felt excluded from university life, both through lacking the childcare to attend extra-curricular events, and because their age and life experiences could result in a perceived lack of commonality. This may be true of mature students generally, further exploration of which would be valuable:

*I've been invited to one of my fellow students 21st birthday parties next weekend, but I don't think I'll be going. I explained the lack of childcare, and she said I could bring my kids along as it was a private party. Except I would feel "out of it" as my children are nearer the age of my fellow-student than I am!*

(F61, two children aged 12 and nine,  
Year 2 of f/t BA Social Sciences with Politics)

Many would have preferred to live on campus if family accommodation were available. Living off campus exacerbated feelings of isolation. Online social spaces were highly valued by lone parent students with limited adult company and childcare:

*Most of my friends I speak to via the computer, it is a life line for me as I don't get to have face to face relationships with many people.*

(F22, age 33, one child aged three,  
final year f/t BA History and American studies).

Such contact could facilitate virtual communities of similarly experienced, likeminded individuals for exchange of chat and support, for those perceiving differences between themselves and their actual student community.

Online provision was highly valued for electronic seminar group sign-up, and for ease of remotely accessing key information on university web pages, library lending and academic articles. Entitlement to use local libraries including interlibrary requests were also important, with calls for extension of such provision.

Nearly half of participants reported being in paid employment. The true figure may be much higher as many of the other half of those surveyed did not disclose employment status. Hours of study and work varied but some worked full-time whilst studying full-time and raising young children unsupported. Juggling employment alongside sole parenting and study clearly affects academic and social university experience. Lone parents frequently worked the minimum weekly 16 hours to qualify for Working Families Tax Credit (WFTC). Critics argue that the Tax Credit system provides a financial disincentive to increasing paid work for lone parents (Klett-Davies, 2007, p.46), a perception also attested to by participants. Part-time employees were more likely to report stress and obstacles to HE participation than full-time employees or the unemployed. This may suggest that part-time employees have less allocated study

time, as some full-time employees were studying on day release from work. Part-time employees may be juggling disproportionately heavy study loads alongside employment, and may be hindered by lesser childcare provision. Recurrent obstacles included finances, transport, childcare and housing. Part-time employees' problems in these areas may stem from earning less. Indeed, participants reported loss of earnings through decreased employment hours in order to study. Lone parents in part-time employment were most likely to have student loans, with obvious debt implications.

Perhaps surprisingly, full-time employees most frequently reported financial hardship. This may represent cost-benefit evaluation, in terms of whether the financial benefits of full-time employment compensated adequately for costs including stress, tiredness and being apart from children. Full-time employees most frequently talked about life in terms of 'juggling' or 'balancing'. Employment usually took priority over study because it paid the bills and hours were non-negotiable. Paid work and childcare responsibilities had to be fulfilled, leaving study to be fitted in around them as best as could be:

*The most difficult part is really doing the assignments. I have to fit them in around the work day (I work full time) and the children. It's quite hard to fit it all in or get a good long stretch to sit down and do an assignment. By the time I've had a full day at work and done the tea etc I could just flop in a chair and relax.*

(F13, two children, one year through PG certificate  
Managing Health and Social Care)

Participants hoped that HE completion would enhance future employment, although evidence as to whether this is the case is conflicting (Taylor, 2007, Horne and Hardie 2002, Woodley and Wilson 2002; Jenkins and Symons, 2001, Brennan et al., 1999; Burns and Scott, 1993).

Lone parent students usually had little time for leisure, which was relegated to the end of a long list of time and financial priorities:

*Time is divided mostly into work, domestic responsibilities, study, sleep and then leisure. Work being 35 hours with 5 a week travelling. Leisure gets sidelined as I cannot NOT sleep or clean or look after my son and heir !!!!!'*

(F39, one son, OU p/t BSc Social Policy)

Participants experienced guilt when spending time on anything not immediately orientated toward education or children. Missing opportunities for relaxation and recreation with other adults impacted on health and wellbeing, with many reporting not having time to exercise. Lack of social contact outside the family carries particular implications for lone parents, who without a partner, also forego adult company at home. While socialising may not seem a priority, it could be central to rebuilding self-confidence after relationship breakdowns. Such reluctance to allocate resources to social pursuits and well-being represents what Reay has defined as the lack of 'care of the self' amongst mature, working-class women students (2003, p. 301).



Many also reported housing to be a problem area, the previously cited lack of campus accommodation being central. For those without cars, being able to live on campus and send pre-school children to a campus crèche would save often long daily journeys by public transport between home, childcare and university, allowing more precious time to be devoted to studies. Some felt hindered by dependence on a support network preventing geographical mobility, others experienced isolation because they had chosen to leave such networks for university places. Lone parents who shared homes with other adults reported the benefits - including company and childcare. Some lived with their own parents to facilitate study practically and financially, although this was often an unsatisfactory arrangement. Many hoped that successful HE completion would facilitate more satisfactory and secure housing.

Struggling to manage multiple demands alone on a limited budget impacted detrimentally on mental health for many, often leading to stress or depression, with some turning to counselling and/or anti-depressants in response:

*I had quite a few problems again towards the end of last semester and didn't finish my degree. In fact I had a bit of a breakdown, finally admitted to my parents how hard I found it coping alone, working, studying and bringing up my daughters. I also admitted that I was seriously in debt.*

(F38, two children)

Responses to research questions demonstrated that relationship breakdowns often impacted detrimentally on the mental health of participants and their children. Self-esteem attacked by ex-partners needed rebuilding, and university participation could contribute importantly to this. Several reported ongoing court cases over property and custody disputes, domestic violence and cases of stalking and abduction of children by non-custodial parents. This fits with recent findings that lone parents are often fleeing violent relationships, being more than three times as likely as women in other types of household to have experienced domestic violence (One Parent Families, 2007, p.7). Calls from lone parent participants for greater provision of counselling facilities as part of their HE studies reinforce such recommendations in the existing literature (Wisker, 1996; Hyatt and Parry-Crooke, 1990, Edwards, 1993).

## **Discussion**

The persistence of lone parenthood as a social trend and the necessity for lone parents to gain qualifications to make work viable, alongside the international agenda of HE widening participation and the difficulties lone parents report juggling HE with other responsibilities, collectively point to a need for deep-seated institutional change. The university sector and individual HEIs, (departments and faculty), have responsibilities to acknowledge the experiences lone parents bring to HE and the responsibilities they juggle, as several commentators have recognised (Horne and Hardie, 2002; Wisker, 1996). Reay suggests that many pre-1992 universities are the ones which need the largest cultural change (2003), and trajectories of lone parents at different institutions support this. Lone parents' trajectories highlight the need for more guidance from HEIs

to ease the transition to university (Knox, 2005). Equally as important is increased financial support. The argument put forward by Roger Brown, ex vice-chancellor of Southampton Solent University, is relevant here, that if the government is truly serious about widening participation, they must ensure that working-class students, and those HEIs with the highest concentrations of them, stop incurring the greatest costs. One way to do this, Brown argues, would be to free up funds to assist part-time and mature students, particularly those with family responsibilities. Further relevant is Brown's argument that universities should work harder to address the cultural factors inhibiting working-class participation (2007).

Similarly, this author's research findings reinforced calls for increased mature student bursaries and dependent's allowance; more vocational courses attracting training subsidies and leading to positive career outcomes; greater flexibility over repayment of student loans and more creative distribution of hardship funds as recommended by Scott et al. Findings further supported recommendations for greater dialogue between HE providers and Benefits Agencies as well as increased awareness of lone parent students' needs and entitlements amongst Local Authorities and Housing Associations, and integration of childcare policy into the government's widening participation strategy. Scott et al.'s recommendations for timetabling to suit parents (2003), as well as the importance of well-informed advice for student parents (2003) were also clearly relevant to the group of students who took part in the author's research. Many of the problems lone parents faced balancing HE with wider life highlight the need for more easily available and accurate information, as suggested by Taylor (2007), Carlisle (2005), Horne and Hardie (2002), Dearing (1997) and Wisker (1996).

A need for increased flexibility across course delivery was clear from these lone parents' responses. Flexible class times and deadlines; more varied borrowing rules in libraries; more widespread use of technology (e.g. videotaping lectures); were all cited as things which could make mature students feel more included in the learning process, especially those with children, (cf. Christie et al. 2005 and Gallagher et al. 1993). Taylor's observation that non-flexible courses that are inaccessible to students who have to work in term-time amount to class discrimination, is also relevant (Taylor, 2007). This author's research also highlighted a continuing need for more widespread localised course provision to counterbalance lone parents' frequent lack of geographical mobility, a point previously made by Wisker (1996).

Amongst the key themes highlighted by this piece of research is the need for greater childcare provision, also acknowledged by existing commentators (Jackson, 2004; Wisker, 1996; Edwards, 1993, Gallagher et al., 1993). Apart from allowing more time to focus on study, greater childcare provision would enable lone parent students to participate more fully in the social life of university. Returns from students who took part in the research demonstrated the extent to which these spheres are linked, individuals needing to have social contact in order to get the most from their studies, and ensure wellbeing of self and family.

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# Students and term-time work: benefit or hindrance?

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## **Abstract**

*This paper examines the extent to which term-time employment influences two particular aspects of the student experience in higher education: working collaboratively and preparing for entry into the graduate labour market. The study is based on three research projects: an ongoing piece of action research into the factors influencing student engagement in collaborative activities for examination preparation; a related study into attitudes to group work; and a study into how students make career decisions. In all of these studies term-time working was identified as a factor influencing student engagement in collaborative/group activities and career planning and preparation. However, the research found that term-time is often 'blamed' by the students for their failure to engage in these activities when other factors are more influential. This paper argues that term-time jobs can benefit both academic studies and student prospects in the graduate labour market. They should be supported in this by both higher education institutions and employers. The government ought to monitor the situation, and if necessary, introduce legislation to protect students from the negative effects of term-time employment.*

## **Introduction**

Debate about students and term-time working tends to emphasise its negative impact. A number of studies indicate that term-time working has an adverse influence on the students' academic performance (e.g. Barke et al., 2000; Curtis and Shani, 2002; Metcalf, 2003; Curtis and Williams, 2002; Carney et al., 2005; Humphrey, 2006). For example, Humphrey found 'there was a marked and significant reduction in the end-of-year average of students who were employed at the time of the survey' (2006, p. 275). Term-time working is also said to restrict the students' ability to participate in a broad range of extra-curricular activities (e.g. volunteering, sporting and cultural activities, overseas study, etc.) or to engage in the process of career decision-making and planning (Pitcher and Purcell, 1998; Hatcher, 1998; CHERI, 2002; Morey et al., 2003; Moreau and Leathwood, 2006).

From a widening participation perspective this is important because students from working class backgrounds are more likely to have to engage in term-time working due to financial pressures (Barke et al., 2000; Blasko, 2002; Brennan and Shah, 2003 citing Little et al., 2003; Hunt et al., 2004). Research also indicates that working class students, on average, work longer hours than their middle class peers (Barke et al., 2000; Pennel

and West, 2005). Term-time work may therefore negatively affect students – especially those from working class backgrounds – in terms of both their performance at university and in the graduate labour market.

There is some evidence to suggest that working class students perform less well academically than their middle class peers (e.g. CHERI, 2002; Little, 2002 citing Humphrey 2001). However, the evidence is limited and there are also other studies indicating that social class is not a factor. For example, Metcalf (1993) and Hogarth et al. (1997) contend that once in higher education working class students perform just as well as their middle class counterparts.

There is stronger evidence of working class disadvantage in the labour market (see for example Marshall et al., 1997; Evans, 2002; Purcell et al., 2002; Brown and Hesketh, 2004). However, there are a number of interconnecting factors besides the level of term-time working contributing to this disadvantage. For example inferior educational achievement prior to entering university (DfEE, 2000; Hutchings and Archer, 2001; UUK, 2003; Gorard and Smith, 2007); graduation from less prestigious institutions (Forsyth and Furlong, 2000; Reay et al., 2001; HEFCE, 2004; Greenbank, 2006); and inferior levels of social and cultural capital (Savage and Egerton, 1997; Pitcher and Purcell, 1998; Purcell et al., 2002; Brown et al., 2002; Brown, 2003; Brown and Hesketh, 2004) are all factors contributing to working class disadvantage in the graduate labour market. This means it is very difficult to isolate the effect of term-time working on student success in the labour market.

### **Research methodology**

This paper draws upon three studies carried out by the authors:

- The first study is an on-going piece of action research into the application of collaborative approaches to examination preparation on a business and management degree at Edge Hill University (see Greenbank, 2003, 2007). This study makes use of written questionnaires, focus groups and face-to-face interviews.
- A second study involved 56 final year business and management undergraduates completing a questionnaire about their attitude to group work. Because the action research project described above had identified term-time working as an issue influencing student participation in collaborative approaches to examination preparation, the questionnaire incorporated a section on this.
- Finally, a Higher Education Careers Service Unit (HECSU) sponsored research project examined how working class undergraduates (defined as students from lower socio-economic groups) prepared for entry into the graduate labour market. This study involved a survey of 165 students and in-depth interviews with 30 final year students across a range of subject areas at Edge Hill University (see Greenbank and Hepworth, 2008).

In all of these research projects term-time employment was identified as an issue by the students. This paper utilises data from these studies to evaluate the influence of term-time working on the students' experience of university life. Firstly, the extent to which students are able to engage in collaborative/group activities will be examined. Secondly, the way in which career decision-making, planning and preparation are influenced by term-time working will be analysed.

### **Collaborative/group activities**

Student engagement in group and collaborative work is seen as a way of improving academic performance by promoting 'deep' learning (Boud et al., 1999; Bourner et al., 2001). It is also regarded as a medium for developing the type of group working skills demanded by employers (Economist, 2004; Knight, 2002; Chapman et al., 2006).

As Table 1 (below) indicates the students in our studies were generally positive about collaborative activities, even when it involved assessed work. However, in both the action research project and the questionnaire on attitudes to group work the students reported that their term-time employment restricted the time they had available for group work.

	Number	Percentage
Love it	3	5.4%
Welcome it	25	44.6%
No strong feelings	15	26.8%
Would prefer not to have to do it	10	17.9%
Hate it	3	5.4%
<b>Total</b>	<b>56</b>	<b>100%</b>

The questionnaire completed by the students also revealed significant differences in the amount of term-time work undertaken (see Table 2).

Weekly hours worked	Number	Percentage
None	10	17.9%
1-5	1	1.8%
6-10	1	1.8%
11-19	22	39.3%
20 or more	22	39.3%
<b>Total</b>	<b>56</b>	<b>100%</b>

There did not, however, seem to be any relationship between the amount of hours the students worked and either their attitude to group work or their involvement in



activities involving group work. Further analysis of the data revealed that one of the key reasons for this lack of association is that when the students worked appears to be more important than the amount of hours they worked. Even though some students were working long hours, most of the hours they worked (nearly 80 per cent) were at the weekend and in the evening – which means their term-time employment did not impact upon their ability to engage in group work.

Interviews and focus groups with the students also revealed that they often used their term-time employment as an excuse for not engaging in group work. As Curtis (2007) argues many of the students have combined term-time working and study throughout their education. It has therefore become an accepted part of their lives and something they automatically build into their routine (see Manthei and Gilmore, 2005 and Curtis and Shani, 2002 for similar comments). What seems to be more important is the fact that the majority of students at Edge Hill commute in to university from their homes. Moreover, the students admit that they are reluctant to come in to university because they prefer to work at home. These ‘takeaway students’ therefore come to university when they need to and once they have obtained what they require (course notes, briefings about assignments, etc.), they return home to ‘consume’ their education.

### **Career decision-making, planning and preparation**

Research suggests that student involvement in extra-curricular activities and early engagement with career planning and decision-making has a positive influence on student employment outcomes (see for example Blasko, 2002). In the HECSU study on career decision-making a number of students mentioned term-time working as a factor limiting their involvement in such activities. However, only a minority of students referred to this. There also appeared to be no relationship between the number of hours students worked and their engagement in non-paid extra-curricular activities and career planning and decision-making. For example, two students from the same course were interviewed. One worked for 20 hours a week, but he still managed to apply for eight trainee management jobs and had been through the process of interviews and tests at assessment centres. In contrast, the other student had suspended her term-time job prior to commencing the final year of her degree, but she had not carried out any research into the graduate job market or applied for a single job. She said:

*“I had my last part-time job in [the] summer and then since the third year I haven’t worked because I know a lot of emphasis is placed on this year”.*

This means that even when they have time, the students are often not using it to engage in career enhancing extra-curricular activities or career planning and decision-making. Instead the students tend to focus on their studies and obtaining a ‘good’ degree – what Pitcher and Purcell (1998, p. 194) refer to as the “essential 2:1”. The students did not appreciate the importance of building up what Brown and Hesketh (2004) refer to as their “personal capital”. Indeed, the students in our study did not see the importance of developing skills and relevant experience in their term-time jobs. Moreover, many of the students did not feel the need to look for graduate employment because of their

term-time jobs. For example, an information systems student said:

*I know you're supposed to start looking for jobs early so that when you finish uni you've got a job waiting for you. But because I've got a job already I'm a little bit more relaxed about getting into a job.*

Term time jobs are therefore being used by a number of students as a way of delaying the need to find a job immediately after graduation.

## **Discussion**

It appears from this research that term-time working is often blamed by the students for their failure to engage in particular activities. However, further questioning and analysis of the data reveals that the situation is more complex than this. We found the students' reluctance to engage in group work is more likely to result from a preference for working from home. Furthermore, the students' lack of engagement with career planning and unpaid extra-curricular activities tends to arise because the students concentrate on their studies and obtaining a 'good' degree.

Therefore, the impact of term-time employment may not be as bad as sometimes portrayed by students. The results of our research suggest that the negative influence of term-time working may be exaggerated, particularly when we are reliant on student perceptions. This is not to say that term-time employment cannot disadvantage students - the evidence from other studies (e.g. Barke et al., 2000; Hunt et al., 2004; Humphrey, 2006) suggests that term-time employment can adversely influence academic performance, especially if excessive hours are worked (Curtis and Shani, 2002; Hunt et al., 2004).

However, there are also a range of potential advantages accruing to students who have term-time jobs (see Curtis and Shani, 2002; Manthei and Gilmore, 2005). For example, term-time working can provide an additional learning environment within which students are able to increase their knowledge of organisational life, link theory to practice and develop transferable skills. The students can gain work experience, including experience relevant to the sector or job they ultimately want to pursue as a career. Term-time employment can present opportunities for students to access different forms of cultural capital, which may improve the students' career opportunities. Our research also indicates that a number of students stay in their term-time jobs once they graduate because they enjoy their jobs and they feel there are opportunities for advancement.

This research suggests that many students are in term-time jobs that enable them to achieve at least some of the benefits identified above. Nearly half (45.7 per cent) of the students participating in the questionnaire on attitudes to group work were engaged in term-time work we classified (using ONS, 2005) as 'skilled non-manual'. For example, students were working as book-keepers, credit advisers and in administrative roles. Some students were also in first-line management or supervisory positions. One

student, for instance, had a management position in a pub/restaurant. This student was aware of the transferable skills he was developing; he was able to relate his experiences at work to his course; and because he wanted to pursue a career in this sector he was obviously obtaining relevant experience. Similarly, a student we interviewed in the study on career decision-making appreciated that the skills he was developing whilst working at a fast food restaurant would help him to pursue his ultimate career goal of joining the police force:

*What I've found in talking to employers is that the job at McDonalds, the skills that you use within that job are quite helpful in other careers. Like eventually I want to join the police and talking to the police they were quite impressed that I actually worked at McDonalds, because I'm a manager there already, and have been for a couple of years, and the skills that you've got to use there like I've got to deal with drunk people, dealing with different age groups and things like that.*

The idea that students can develop their cultural capital is, however, more problematic. Research indicates that many graduate recruiters are looking for particular (i.e. middle class) values and dispositions (Brown et al., 2002; Purcell et al., 2002; Brown and Hesketh, 2004). Whether students are able to develop 'acceptable' forms of cultural capital in their term-time jobs depends upon the nature of the environment within which they work. The working class students in the study on career decision-making were much less likely to be employed in skilled non-manual occupations or have supervisory/managerial positions in their term-time jobs. They are typically working as bar workers or sales assistants in retail outlets. It can be argued that such jobs will help students to develop useful skills in communication and team working. However, there may be other skills – and what might be described as 'middle class values and dispositions' – that are not being developed. This may not matter to middle class students who already possess the type of cultural capital valued by graduate employers, but for working class students who do not, it may disadvantage them when they apply for jobs.

### **Conclusion and implications**

There is a tendency for students to choose jobs on the basis of pay and convenience, rather than the longer-term benefits that are likely to accrue to them in the graduate labour market (Little, 2002; Curtis, 2007). In order to benefit from the advantages of term-time working we would argue that undergraduates need to choose their term-time jobs on the basis of the skills, experience, course relevance and (possibly) the cultural capital that can be derived from them. We do, however, recognise that students from middle class backgrounds are likely to have superior social networks than those from working class backgrounds (see Skeggs, 1997; Furlong and Cartmel, 2005; Thomas and Jones, 2007). This means they will have better opportunities for obtaining term-time work that offers longer-term career benefits. In addition, students who lack social skills and have low levels of confidence (who are arguably more likely to be working class) may struggle to obtain a term-time job, especially one that is relevant to their studies and career aspirations.

Higher education institutions (HEIs) are playing an important role (through careers services, education support offices, personnel departments, etc.) in helping students to secure appropriate types of term-time work (Little, 2002). However, institutions need to ensure that students from working class backgrounds (and other sections of the student population that may be disadvantaged) are provided with more support. HEIs should also make sure that students take account of the full range of benefits that term-time jobs can provide.

We also feel that academics should play a more active role in encouraging students to consider their career aspirations when searching and applying for term-time work. The evidence suggests that HEI careers services would welcome the involvement of academics because it raises the status of careers education amongst the students (Brennan and Shah, 2003). We would also argue that, wherever possible, courses should aim to incorporate the students' experiences of term-time employment into their learning (see Curtis and Shani, 2002 for similar comments).

Finally, government policy ought to be sensitive to the problems students face. The government needs to ensure that students are not put under levels of financial strain that force them to work excessive hours. One of the problems we also became aware of whilst carrying out this research was employers putting pressure on students to work long hours. We would argue that employers should try to ensure that their student-employees term-time work does not adversely affect their education. Employers should recognise the dual role that their student-employees have, and do everything they can (without obviously jeopardising their organisational objectives), to support their education. If employers do not act responsibly it may be necessary to introduce legislation limiting the amount of hours students can work and setting out the obligations employers have to their employees who are in 'full-time' education. It would be a pity if the benefits of term-time employment were neutralised by students working too many hours or being unable to use their workplace as a learning resource.

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# Employability and the Aimhigher student ambassador scheme in South East London

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## **Abstract**

*The student ambassador scheme (hereafter SA scheme) was introduced in South East London in 2000 at the University of Greenwich to assist campus tours and university open days. Since its introduction, the SA scheme has seen a dramatic expansion in its size and scope, with student ambassadors (hereafter SAs) taking an increasingly central role in the delivery of widening participation activities in the sub-region. By March 2006, there were about 400 SAs employed by Aspire South East London Aimhigher, across institutions of higher and further education. This paper is interested in the impact the scheme has had on the students involved. In particular the paper focuses on the impact the scheme has had on student views of employability. In doing so, it contributes to two bodies of research: the role of SAs on the one hand, and the impact of part-time work on higher education students on the other.*

## **Introduction**

In 2006, Rhodes et al. (2006, p.44) lamented a 'dearth of literature on ambassadors'. The authors were referring to nursing SAs in particular, but their claim is equally true on a wider scale. Despite the fact that the growth of student ambassador schemes coincided with a growing awareness of their potential and usefulness to HEIs (cf. Aimhigher and other HEI widening participation initiatives) to this day the area remains under-researched. To date arguably the most serious study on the topic is Murphy's (2006) Master's dissertation. Murphy draws on Colley's work on mentoring (Colley 2003), and takes a critical stance on the extent to which a SA scheme actually empowers participants, emphasising the 'disciplinary nature of power that permeates the scheme' (Murphy 2006, p.1). In doing so, she challenges Paczuska's (2004; see also Gartland and Paczuska 2007) view of the SA scheme as a source of social and cultural capital for both SAs and learners. Austin and Hatt (2005) argue that the main benefits to be gained from involvement in SA scheme are self-esteem and transferable skills, benefits which are also highlighted by Evans (2006), with particular reference to the skills demanded by post-Fordist societies, Hall (2007) and Stirling (2006).

By contrast, there is no shortage of literature on the impact of part-time work on higher education students. A recurrent theme in this literature (e.g. Metcalf 2003;

Moreau and Leathwood 2006) is the detrimental effect of part-time work on studying and on the students' lives, and its contribution to exacerbating inequality between high and low socio-economic status individuals, as well as between old (pre-1992) and new (post-1992) universities. While part-time work is often accommodated for by the latter it is not always by the former. This view is contested by Greenbank et al. (2007), who stress that not all part-time work is equally bad; if part-time work is carried out in the evenings, weekends and outside term-time, for example, it may have little or no effect on studying; not all students do unqualified work, and part-time work can also help them embark on a career path.

This paper shows that the SA scheme fosters identification with education and higher education, and that SAs see the role as one which provides them with high levels of satisfaction, confidence, as well as the experience of working. To a lesser extent students also reported that the role helped them to develop their study skills<sup>1</sup>. The type of institution to which SAs belong is of key importance in shaping attitudes towards the scheme, not because 'new universities' accommodate the demands of working-class students more easily, but because the particular 'institutional habitus' of new universities disciplines them towards endorsing utilitarian/vocational, as well as academic values.

### **Method and sample**

The findings presented here are primarily based on the results of a postal survey carried out by Aspire South East London Aimhigher in November 2006 with current and past higher education SAs. Seven hundred and fourteen questionnaires were posted, and 140 responses were received (response rate: 20 per cent; a relatively good response). The questions asked included:

- why students had applied to become a SA
- the extent to which being a SA met expectations
- the usefulness of the SA training in terms of preparing both to be a SA and preparing for the world of work
- which skills had been gained or improved
- which activity developed those skills
- to what extent being a SA had improved a student's employability
- whether SAs felt supported as members of teams
- what influence the SA scheme had had on students choice of career
- how being a SA compared with other part-time work
- the extent to which being a SA contributed to personal development portfolios.

The first five questions were divided into ten or eleven items, which respondents were asked to rate from zero to five; the latter being 'very important' and the former being

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<sup>1</sup> Whilst the SA scheme does not fall within Greenbank et al.'s (2007) definition of 'helpful part-time work' it does offer a positive student work model countering the view that part-time work is necessarily associated with heightened stress and lower academic performance.

‘not important’. The other questions gave three options, such as ‘greatly’, ‘somewhat’, and ‘not at all’, or ‘very much’, ‘a little’, and ‘not at all’.

The focus of the analysis of the answers which follows is on the modal answer, and the proportion of individuals choosing positive and very positive answers. The ways in which attitudes are shaped by the social identity of the respondent has been examined by comparing the distribution of positive and negative answers across social groups, whenever possible, testing the hypothesis that there is an association between the answer given and belonging to a particular group. Analysis also draws from semi-structured interviews with four SA coordinators and eleven SAs, and content analysis of comments made by a SA coordinator in relation to SA selection in a new university. By combining quantitative and qualitative methods, the authors sought to contextualise the results of the survey, as well as providing insight into the reasoning behind the students’ responses.

Within the survey sample, the age range is between 18 and 53; the mode is 22 years old. The higher than expected typical age reflects the fact that almost half of the respondents are no longer SAs. A sizeable proportion of the sample, about one fifth, were mature students (a fact also reflected in the age range). In line with the University of Greenwich SA population, in which females make up around 70 per cent of all SAs, there is a definite gender bias towards females, who account for almost three quarters of the respondents<sup>2</sup>.

Additionally, the majority of respondents were from deprived areas. This may be attributable to the fact that part-time work is more common amongst less well-off students. The majority of the SAs taking part in the survey (almost 90 per cent) were undergraduate SAs employed by new universities. 10 per cent of respondents finished being a SA in 2003 or earlier, reflecting the expansion of the scheme over subsequent years, and almost two thirds declared that they completed more than two years of service as an ambassador<sup>3</sup>. About 10 per cent of the respondents are or were education students intending to undertake a career in education or working in education.

## **Results**

A sizeable proportion of the respondents, over 10 per cent, declared that they changed their career path after the SA experience. The real figure is likely to be bigger, as there is some evidence that the phrasing of the research question produced negatively biased results. Half of the respondents said that being an ambassador had influenced their career choice ‘a lot’ (33 per cent) or ‘somewhat’ (17 per cent). The majority of those who had other part-time work indicated that the SA scheme was ‘more important’ in terms of directing their career choice<sup>4</sup>.

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2 Female respondents cited ‘working with my old school’ and ‘working with young people’ more often than their male colleagues as reasons to join the SA scheme.

3 It is common for SAs to serve for more than two years. According to the Greenwich database, about 80% do.

4 It was also noticeable that SAs affiliated to new universities tended to score higher than those belonging to old universities in virtually all questions, including those mentioned here but not in the question on changing career.

Developing their career awareness and, to a lesser extent, enjoyment and pride in belonging to their institutions are the main reasons why students become SAs. The ambassador training was found helpful by the majority of the respondents both in terms of preparing them for being a SA and for the world of work. In these questions the mode was either 'important' or 'very important' across virtually all items. The modal category in the answers to the question as to the extent to which the SA experience improved student performance was 'somewhat'. Less than 15 per cent chose 'not at all'. Responses to the question on enhancing employability also produced the modal category 'somewhat'; however, a higher proportion than in the previous question (40 per cent as opposed to 35 per cent) chose 'greatly', and a lower proportion, 10 per cent, chose 'not at all'. The great majority (over 70 per cent) said that they felt 'very much' supported as a SA member of a team. Amongst those who had other part-time work, the majority of individuals said that being a SA was more important to them in terms of developing skills. A marked majority of individuals, over 65 per cent, said that being a SA contributed 'very much' to things you are able to record on the Personal Development Portfolio; only very few, less than 4 per cent, said 'not at all'. However, it should be noted that SAs who finished in 2003 or earlier and, to a lesser extent, mature students, tended to score lower in questions relating to employability. This may in part be due to increased awareness of the harshness of the world of work. Given this dip it may be wise to ensure that SAs do not develop unreasonable expectations with respect to the long-term career benefits of the scheme.

A strong identification with Aspire emerged from the qualitative analysis. This identification is fostered through the ever present logo, designed so as to appeal to and stimulate the enthusiasm of the young, and reproduced on the clothing that SAs always wear when on duty, as well as on a number of gadgets, ranging from mobile phone chains, pens and bags. Even when prompted to express negative views in the interviews, the SAs were reluctant to do so, and an aura of enthusiasm surrounding the scheme often representing a serious obstacle towards going beyond scratching the surface<sup>5</sup>.

Respondents felt pride in representing their HE institution as student ambassadors. Indeed, the way in which the SA scheme helps individuals to feel part of the institution, in a situation where deprived individuals (and, one might add, international students<sup>6</sup>) often feel that they do not fit in (Connor 2001), was clearly one of the main benefits to participants in the scheme. Feeling that they belonged helped them to see the point of studying.

Education students also found that the SA work had direct relevance to their degrees and helped them to develop working and study skills. They could take part in activities

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5 The fact that the survey was answered on a voluntary basis, giving rise to a less than optimal response rate, that it was carried out by the students' employer, and that the questions were phrased in such a way that there were plenty of opportunities to manifest enthusiasm, but few or none to express grievances, mean that a positive bias must be taken into account in interpreting the results.

6 International students make up a high proportion of the SA group. In 2005-06, for example, British students accounted for just over a half of the SAs employed by the University of Greenwich. This was also reflected in the fact that "work with my old school" was the least important reason why respondents wanted to become a SA.

related to their degree whilst also acquiring time-keeping, planning and organisational skills. Habits of punctuality, time-keeping, and orderly behaviour were regularly emphasised in the interviews by SAs and SA coordinators alike<sup>7</sup>.

Long-serving SAs tend to find the programme more beneficial in terms of study and employability skills development. The centrality of 'confidence' deserves to be stressed. Gaining 'confidence' was considered the area in which the SA training was most helpful. 'Confidence' was one of the two skills respondents found they developed the most, with leadership the other. In one interview a SA went as far as saying that the main reason why he joined the scheme was to gain 'confidence'<sup>8</sup>.

Items which scored least with respect to the ways in which the SA training was helpful were 'the UK education system' and 'student finance'. These results were confirmed in interviews. SAs declared that they drew both from their experience and from their training when giving information about HE to learners. However, they were remarkably vague when prompted to specify what they had been briefed to say. Given that most SAs come from deprived backgrounds, the fact that they mainly draw from their own experience rather than from their training when communicating information about HE, raises the question of whether they in fact act as reproducers, rather than distributors, of social and cultural capital.

The most important variable at work in shaping attitudes is institutional affiliation. In virtually all questions SAs affiliated to a new university declared that the SA scheme had a greater impact on them than did respondents affiliated to an old university. The difference between new and old university SAs is particularly salient in relation to the perception of impact on employability and study skills. Further analysis shows that it would be simplistic to assume that such difference was the result of the fact that a new university's intake is more typically formed of lower socio-economic, more instrumentally-minded, individuals. Students from lower socio economic backgrounds did rate the scheme highly in terms of its impact on the direction of their career (perhaps reflecting lower initial levels of cultural and social capital). However, the same individuals did not rate the SA scheme at the same levels in terms of developing study and employability skills. Hence, it seems legitimate to conclude that the different rates of response may be the product of a different 'institutional habitus' (Reay et al. 2005), whereby vocational and utilitarian, as opposed to academic skills are valued more by new universities than old ones.

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<sup>7</sup> It is easy to liken the SAs to the 'disciplined bodies' described by Foucault (1977)

<sup>8</sup> Confidence is of course highly valued in the post-Fordist job market, and its development can help in addressing current complaints from employers about the lack of leadership skills among graduates (Zinser 2003). However, there is a risk that the SA scheme may contribute to producing an 'authoritarian personality' (Adorno et al. 1982). Content analysis of comments recorded during recruitment of SAs by one coordinator reveals that, in a document about 1300 words long, the word 'confidence' is cited approvingly 20 times.

## Conclusion

The main conclusion reached by these authors is that SAs tend to find the Student Ambassador scheme primarily helpful in terms of developing skills for their future career. The outcome of the survey is encouraging for the SA scheme. Whilst concerns have been raised that SAs may develop unreasonable expectations in relation to long-term career benefits of the scheme, that the scheme may foster an 'authoritarian personality', and that the SA training may not construct SAs as effective redistributors of cultural and social capital, the role of student ambassador emerges as a high-satisfaction job with a positive impact on study and, particularly, employability skills for those that took part in it. Interestingly, the different attitudes held by new and old universities towards the SA schemes can be traced to different 'institutional habitus', whereby vocational and utilitarian, rather than academic skills are valued more by new universities. Perhaps there is room for more research into these differences – particularly the types of agency promoted by studying in new universities and consequent success in bridging the academic, vocational, employability gaps for learners.

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# Working with schools: active citizenship for undergraduate social science students

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## **Abstract**

*This paper presents research findings from the 'Working with Schools: Active Citizenship for Undergraduate Social Science Students' project. The project involved collaboration between three new universities, two of which introduced citizenship modules incorporating an 'active citizenship' component. The aim of the modules was to enrich the undergraduate understanding and experience of citizenship through practical activities working in and with schools and colleges, particularly those institutions serving disadvantaged communities. An extensive evaluation of the project was undertaken and this paper focuses on the research findings from one of the universities which introduced a first-year 'Citizenship and Identity' module. The module included an 'active citizenship' component involving students facilitating school council conferences. The research findings illustrate issues around student engagement with citizenship, both as an academic subject and in relation to students' reflective capacities and skills vis-à-vis citizenship in broader terms. The project represented an innovative intervention in local communities that had many positive outcomes, but it also posed challenges for staff and students.*

## **Introduction**

Citizenship education has undergone a rapid expansion in the UK during the last decade. Attention has focused on the introduction of citizenship within the school curriculum in England following the publication of the Crick Report (QCA, 1998). This report defined citizenship in terms of social responsibility, community involvement and political literacy; 'active citizenship' is therefore important in how the report approached citizenship education. The Crick Report adopted a developmental approach in setting out what a pupil is expected to have learnt about citizenship at key stages in their school career, although citizenship has actually only been made compulsory within the secondary school curriculum (age 11-16). A growing pedagogical and social scientific literature has critically examined the Crick Report and its implementation. For critics, the Crick proposals contained flawed assumptions about contemporary citizenship including essentialist ideas of national identity that cannot address issues of diversity and difference, a failure to address structural social inequality and an implicit moral



authoritarianism (see inter alia Osler and Starkey 2000; Cunningham and Lavalette 2004; Faulks 2006). Faulks (2006, p.135) stresses the way that citizenship education should be broadened out beyond Crick by introducing emotive and moral elements based upon challenging social stereotypes and developing in pupils a 'positive sense of self and sense of empathy and solidarity with others that may be very different from themselves'.

The Crick proposals and subsequent policy reforms have centred upon schools, but there have also been a number of publicly funded initiatives to develop and support citizenship education in UK universities in recent years, as seen in the Dearing Report (NCIHE, 1997). Many universities now offer opportunities for their students to become involved in various kinds of community and voluntary work, for example via the Higher Education Active Community Fund in England (Yarwood, 2005). All the issues raised by citizenship education in relation to schools, such as how citizenship is conceptualised, curriculum content and modes of delivery, are also relevant to higher education (HE). However, in comparison to the statutory sector, the exploration of citizenship in UK HE remains limited, including little detailed curriculum research (although see Yarwood, 2005, in relation to geography). We begin to address this lacuna with reference to a project on active citizenship in the South East of England.

### **The 'Working with Schools' project and the research**

The 'Working with Schools' project, funded by C-SAP<sup>1</sup>, involved collaboration between three new universities, Buckinghamshire Chilterns University College (BCUC)<sup>2</sup>, the University of East London (UEL) and Roehampton University. This project sought to enrich the undergraduate understanding and experience of citizenship through practical activities working in and with schools and further education colleges, particularly those institutions serving disadvantaged communities. The 'Working with Schools' project built upon the success of an earlier project based upon the development of a third year 'Teaching Citizenship' module that involved BCUC students going into schools to assist in the delivery of the citizenship curriculum; this project was also funded by C-SAP (Gifford, 2004; Gifford et al., 2005)<sup>3</sup>.

The main teaching and learning activities in the 'Working with Schools' project included the design and delivery of two new modules, 'Citizenship and Identity' at year one of the BCUC undergraduate social science programme, and 'Doing Citizenship' in year two at UEL. CRUCIBLE (Centre for Rights Understanding and Citizenship Based on Learning Through Experience)<sup>4</sup> at Roehampton University acted in an advisory/evaluative capacity. Extensive research was undertaken on the project by staff at all three institutions. The overall teaching and learning framework, research methods and

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<sup>1</sup> C-SAP – Subject Centre for Sociology, Anthropology and Politics; C-SAP project reference 23/S/05.

Thanks to Wayne Clark, Judith Burnett, Erika Cudworth and David Woodman for their contribution to the project.

<sup>2</sup> Since renamed Buckinghamshire New University.

<sup>3</sup> 'Embedding Citizenship in the Undergraduate Sociology Curriculum', C-SAP project reference 19/S/03.

<sup>4</sup> Centre of excellence in education in human rights : <http://www.roehampton.ac.uk/crucible/>

findings are detailed in Gifford and Watt (2006). In this paper, we report on those research findings based upon the introduction of the 'Citizenship and Identity' module at BCUC. The paper focuses on the students' perspective and it addresses some of the

possibilities and limitations of embedding a meaningful experience of citizenship within the HE curriculum.

The 'Citizenship and Identity' (CI) module was designed to interest and engage undergraduate students from a range of social science degrees in debates relating to citizenship. The module sought to enable students to apply citizenship issues and debates to real-life contexts and to reflect upon the way in which they and others learn citizenship. It followed a structured lecture and seminar format that explored a range of citizenship issues such as national identity, European integration and human rights.

The CI module also contained active learning opportunities involving working with school councils. The latter enabled students to experience citizenship in action and to undertake practical work as a compliment to the theoretical component. Students had to attend and facilitate at one of four school council conferences organised by BCUC staff in conjunction with teaching staff drawn from ten Buckinghamshire secondary schools. Representatives from each school council, as well as teachers, attended the conferences. During the first conference, the school councillors gave the name 'Bucks Schools Voice' (BSV) to their meetings and set out a series of aims including meeting regularly to share ideas, planning joint projects, and also challenging existing divisions between schools. The conferences, which were all held at BCUC, started with a verbal report from each school council and then the councillors worked on activities in mixed-school groups. The undergraduates worked with groups of councillors, joined in discussions, acted as 'scribes' and generally helped facilitate. A 'Bucks Schools Voice' website was set up with the support of the BCUC web design team and this included copies of conference reports written by BCUC staff.

The 'Working with Schools' project was seen as contributing to the 'widening participation' agenda (HEFCE, 2006), a policy promoted along partnership lines between BCUC and local secondary schools, mainly upper schools. The latter take the '11-plus failures', whilst the grammar schools routinely feature near the top of the national league tables. Eight of the participating schools in the project were upper schools and only two were grammars. Recent OFSTED reports have highlighted the social disadvantages faced by pupils at some upper schools as indicated by above national average levels of free school meals. Previous research has highlighted the tensions that exist locally between multi-ethnic young people from the upper schools and white, middle-class grammar school pupils (Watt and Stenson, 1998). The area of South East England in which the project took place covers one of the most affluent parts of the UK. Despite this general affluence, there are also pockets of deprivation found in certain urban and rural neighbourhoods including those in which some of the upper schools involved in the project were located (Stenson and Watt; 1999a, 1999b).

The research involved both BCUC and the various participating schools. At the end of the 'Citizenship and Identity' module, 33 first-year BCUC students completed a questionnaire asking about their learning experiences plus a range of issues related to citizenship; this represented a 62 per cent response rate. Three quarters of the respondents were psychology students, and the remainder were either sociology or psychology/sociology students. Nine-tenths of the respondents were female, two fifths were from minority ethnic backgrounds, and two fifths were over 24 years of age. In addition to the questionnaire, ten CI students were interviewed at the end of the module, either individually and/or in groups. The interviewees were volunteers; all were female and seven were mature students over the age of 21. In addition, both the BCUC tutors who taught the CI module were interviewed. Members of the research team also acted as observers at the BSV conferences.

## **Research findings**

### *Student interest and engagement with citizenship as an area of study*

Interest and engagement in citizenship as an area of study was generally high amongst the CI students as both the questionnaire and interview data indicate. The questionnaire findings showed that 42 per cent of the students described learning about citizenship in the module as very interesting, 46 per cent as quite interesting and only 12 per cent (four students) found it not interesting. Results from an open question in the questionnaire regarding how important they thought it was for undergraduates to learn about citizenship also produced favourable results. Only 13 per cent thought it was not important to learn about citizenship. Half described it as very important, and not only as an academic subject but also in ways that indicated its wider relevance to their lives, for example:

*I think it is extremely important that undergraduates learn about citizenship, in order to apply its theories to other areas (modules) on the course. Also in understanding and learning that all human beings should be treated in the same way regardless of where they originated from.*

(Q17)<sup>5</sup>

When asked about the different topics covered in the module, the most popular topic was human rights, described as very interesting by three quarters of the respondents. This was illustrated in the open-ended questions, for example: "human rights –because I feel strongly about the disadvantages and unfairness that some individuals experience" (Q25). E-citizenship was the least popular topic by far with two fifths considering this not interesting.

As indicated above, only a minority of the students taking the CI module were sociology students. Most were single honours psychology undergraduates and the fact that such a large percentage of the students taking CI were non-sociologists made a difference to the research findings and also provided a considerable pedagogical challenge for the

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<sup>5</sup> Q17 refers to the questionnaire respondent number.

teaching team, as indicated in their interviews. Moral development was one of the most popular topics studied precisely because of its obvious psychology connection: “[I liked] moral development – as it is very much linked to psychology which is the degree I am taking” (Q20).

Those psychology students aged under 25 were least likely to regard learning about citizenship as very important, because they considered it to be outside the remit of psychology and also because they had not chosen to study it: “I found the course pointless as I couldn’t see anyway it linked with psychology” (Q23). As the CI module leader said, “I think some of the younger ones didn’t engage at times”. The four students who said that the module was “not interesting” in the questionnaire were all younger psychology students. Students’ disciplinary identities are often strong and the research raises issues about non-sociology students having a compulsory first level citizenship module and the importance of trying to make such a module more relevant to their perceived needs. At the same time, the interviews revealed that despite expressing initial disquiet about having to take a non-psychology module, there was a pronounced shift of opinion on the part of the mature psychology students by the end of the CI module, as this typical quote illustrates:

*Initially I didn’t know what the relevance was to my psychology course. So I was confused and then once we started the lessons, I was intrigued and really interested in the subject. And then as the term, the weeks passed, I realised the relevance of it.*  
(Margaret, Psychology)

Both the interview and questionnaire data indicated that the majority of students regarded attendance at the school conference as a very positive aspect of the module, as we discuss below.

*Did students become more skilful, reflective and active citizens?*

One of the key questions raised in the research was whether or not this citizenship education module would enhance undergraduates’ capacity, in terms of knowledge, skills and willingness, to engage in citizenship-related activities. Awareness of citizenship issues was raised among many students. When asked, around 70 per cent of questionnaire respondents said that their interest in both human rights and gender equality had increased as a result of taking the module, whilst 63 per cent said the same about their interest in the environment.

The questionnaire and interview data indicated that not only was students’ awareness of citizenship enhanced by the end of the CI module, but that their skills and emotional capacities relevant to citizenship were also increased, for example in boosting their confidence, enhancing a sense of responsibility, improving their ability to work in groups and presentation skills. This enhancement of skills is especially significant given the fact that many of the BCUC students were themselves from non-traditional HE backgrounds including many mature students. Several of the latter talked about the way in which interacting with the pupils at the school conferences had helped them,

particularly by giving them confidence in relation to their own presentations:

*I had been feeling a bit nervous about the presentation, you know just standing up, and after being at the schools conference I thought 'this is ridiculous, those children are standing up in a big lecture theatre, in a university in front of lots, lots of their contemporaries that they didn't even know and they were very forceful'. So for me it made me think 'don't be ridiculous'. So for that I enjoyed it more, so they taught me a thing really.*

*(Laura, Psychology)*

The students mentioned how they had developed a greater capacity for critical reflection and also that they were better able to appreciate others' points of view. This emerged out of the openly discursive nature of the seminars, which as one student said, could become, "quite heated because people were very set in their ways and hadn't thought about other people's opinions or different cultures or things like that" (Christine, Psychology). As Christine went on to say, this 'heat' did in fact bring some light:

*It was nice because citizenship was sort of in the group itself because we were learning to respect what each other had to say and if we didn't agree, that was also OK. But to still listen to what they had to say, and accept each other for whatever opinions they had, which is what citizenship's about.*

Christine's comment above crystallises the conception of citizenship education that Faulks (2006) advocates in which learning to appreciate the point of view of others, different from the self, is highlighted.

If the students' citizenship capacity in relation to both awareness and skills was enhanced by their educational experiences on the module, to what extent were they more likely to translate this capacity into action? Here the evidence was less emphatic. The students were asked whether they had taken part in any activities related to citizenship during the first year of their degrees. Leaving aside those activities connected to the CI module itself, a total of 11 students had done so, i.e. one third of the total. All of these were women and also mainly over 25 years of age. The activities they had been involved in included fundraising and volunteering for charitable organisations. However, not much of this activity seemed to occur as a direct consequence of the module or their degrees. Nevertheless, the majority of students who were interviewed commented that the CI module had encouraged them to get more 'involved', even though most were somewhat unspecific about what that might mean. Again, the working with schools element was an important source of inspiration, for example:

*It was good, I loved the day, it excited me and enthused me to get involved more and I realised how three hours of your time can make such a big*

*difference to these kids, well to any group really, I mean all we did was facilitate, and I love to be part of the process for change. I think I'm going to do more in the future.*

*(Patricia, Psychology)*

### *Understanding 'others'*

Learning to appreciate others' viewpoints, and especially the viewpoints of 'others' who are different from oneself, came out strongly in the undergraduates' involvement in the school BSV conferences. In particular, the students' preconceptions, including negative stereotypes, regarding young people were contested, an important outcome in relation to Faulks' (2006) notion of citizenship education. One mature student was adamant that this engagement with schools should remain a central part of the module in future years, not least since it challenged her fellow students' views:

*I think that it has to be a central part of the module, doing the school council. Whether it be that the schools come to you or whether it be that we go to the schools. It really helped a lot of my peers to relate, they were really apprehensive about meeting these secondary school kids because they unfortunately believe the stereotypes that these are wild kids who wear you know 'hoodies', and it really changed their perception entirely...their opinion changed dramatically. Also how confident and articulate they were and how worldly they were and how, actually, to some extent how more aware they were of what citizenship was all about.*

*(Sarah, Psychology)*

Furthermore, there was a distinct local dimension to their more enlightened attitudes regarding young people. Many commented on how impressed they were that the pupils, mainly from upper rather than grammar schools, not only had a good grasp of the inequalities between the types of schools but also wanted to challenge these by breaking down school-based stereotypes:

*It surprised me how much of a grasp they'd got about the inequalities of life especially in X [Buckinghamshire town] because of the school system. And that came across, they wanted to tackle it and that came across even though it wasn't to do with what they were discussing, they were very vocal about that inequality and they wanted to put it right ... They were quite passionate about the inequality of their education. So that was, for me, that was quite inspiring. Very thought provoking.*

*(Laura , Psychology)*

Attendance at the school conferences therefore enabled the BCUC students to reflect critically upon their own views regarding young people, not least since the latter sought to challenge some of the negative stereotypes widely held about them. The school conferences meant that undergraduates were directly coming up against the structurally unequal local context within which citizenship education was occurring.

This was a recurrent theme in the BSV conferences, and one that was prominent in the 'Working with Schools' project as a whole, as it had also been in the previous 'Teaching Citizenship' project (Gifford et al., 2005).

### **Discussion and conclusions**

John Annette concludes his overview of research on citizenship education by emphasising the importance of active learning in achieving greater civic and political participation:

*The introduction of citizenship education as a type of effective learning should involve experiential learning in the community and the ability of the student to engage in reflective practice.*

*(2000, p.89)*

However, ensuring that citizenship education involves active learning is not straightforward and is potentially a radical departure from existing approaches to citizenship education. The 'Citizenship and Identity' module discussed in this paper represents one way of opening up citizenship in a meaningful and challenging way to undergraduates. It raised awareness and interest of citizenship amongst students and their own capacities in relation to skills and confidence were enhanced. This is not to say, however, that the module was problem-free. It was demanding upon staff and students in terms of organisation and time commitments and, as we have discussed, there was also evidence of non-engagement especially amongst the younger psychology undergraduates who would have preferred a more obviously degree-relevant unit.

The module worked best when the students engaged with citizenship through an exploration of their own commonalities and differences and, in this case, the differences between themselves and another group of citizen learners i.e. the pupils. The experiential nature of citizenship learning in the CI module challenged their own preconceptions regarding young people and also brought a direct engagement with locally-based patterns of social and educational inequality. The module was not about directly politicising students, but it did engender processes of contesting established social attitudes in a way that is potentially transformative.

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*University life uncovered: making sense of the student experience*

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