

Rethinking quality in terms of students' engagement with academic knowledge

Paul Ashwin, Andrea Abbas, Monica McLean

**The 'Pedagogic quality and inequality in university first degrees' project: November 2008- January 2012
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p.ashwin@lancaster.ac.uk

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My research focus

I am interested in:

- How we conceptualise teaching-learning processes in higher education;
- The impact that different ways of conceptualising these processes have on research outcomes, policies and practices;
- Whether new ways of conceptualising these processes can lead to new ways of understanding higher education.

(see Ashwin 2009)

Pedagogic Quality and Inequality in University First Degrees Project

Origins: challenge to 'quality' and league tables

Aim: to theorise 'just' teaching and learning

Objectives:

(1) to explore the value for students of social science degrees in different universities;

(2) to investigate (in)equities in curriculum and pedagogy;
and

(3) to contribute to debates about pedagogic quality.

The universities

- Sociology and related social science degree courses in four universities: Prestige, Selective, Community, and Diversity
- **Prestige** and **Selective** have been regularly rated in the top third of UK university league tables for Sociology; **Community** and **Diversity** have been regularly rated in the bottom third.

The data

- 160 biographical and longitudinal interviews with students;
- a survey of over 750 students;
- an analysis of curriculum documents;
- an analysis of national policy documents.
- interviews with 16 staff;
- analysis of video recordings of teaching in each institution in each year of the degree (12 sessions);
- analysis of students' assessed work (examples from each year);
- a focus group discussion with tutors from all four institutions about students' assessed work

Approach to Policy analysis

- Documents from 11 groupings of organisations representing the interests of business, educational developers, government, independent reviews of higher education, international organisations, lecturers, parliament, regulatory bodies, students, think tanks, and universities.
- We examined 133 documents from 32 organisations published 2009-2011.



Rather than create a bureaucratic and imperfect measure for quality, our proposals rely on student choice to drive up the quality of higher education. Students need access to high quality information, advice and guidance in order to make the best choices. Improvements are needed. Providing students with clearer information about employment outcomes will close the gap between the skills taught by the higher education system and what employers need.

(Independent Review of Higher Education Funding and Student Finance 2010, 28)



That vision is founded on a fundamental belief in the intrinsic value of education as a force for the enhancement of the lives of individuals, the liberation of their talents and the realisation of a truly civilised, socially responsible, fair and prosperous society.

(University and College Union 2010, 1)

Outcomes from Policy Analysis

- Two different notions of higher education: one market focused another focused on transformation.
- The market model is promoted by a far broader range of organisations than just the government;
- The transformation model is less consistently presented and is weaker than the market model;
- **No sense of positive alternatives.**

What are the outcomes of a high quality undergraduate social science education?

We found *three broad outcomes* of a sociology-related social science undergraduate education:

- Access to and understanding of academic knowledge that is interesting and relevant to students' lives
- Changes in the way that students understand themselves and their place in the world;
- A greater understanding of people and society

Access to and understanding of academic knowledge

I really enjoy just having gained the skills and I think that I have gained them over the last year and half. Extracting information, analyzing it and being able to see beyond the surface material... and being able to go beyond that and find real processes behind what is happening. And linking that into historical and social contexts with cultural theories. That is what I really, really enjoy.

(Ester, Selective)

In our survey, we examined this outcome in terms of **enhanced employability and academic skills**

Changes in the way that students understand themselves and their place in the world

University has opened my eyes too much. I've been too exposed to reading about certain things that are happening around me, I can't just shut my eyes and go back to normality. I don't think I can do that now, I'd feel like I am betraying myself and what I think and what I believe in.

(Martin, Community, Year 3)

In our survey, we examined this outcome in terms of **'increased social confidence'**.

A deeper understanding of people and society

Because of what I've learned in terms of knowledge about the way society is, it's made me question everything more, and I like that because not everything has a definite answer, and I like seeing everything differently and seeing new things and it impacts on me as a person.

(Leena, Diversity, Year 3)

In our survey, we examined this outcome in terms of **'changing self and society'**

The complexities of quality: outcomes

Scale	Ranking of universities*
Enhanced academic skills	Selective, Diversity, Community, Prestige
Enhanced employability skills	Diversity, Community , Selective, Prestige
Social confidence	Prestige, Community, Selective , Diversity
Changing self and society	Selective , Diversity, Prestige, Community

(*Institutions in **Red** have scores that are significantly higher than those in **Blue**)

What processes supported these outcomes?

The outcomes were related to:

1. Students' levels of **engagement with academic knowledge**, which was a process of personal transformation that required hard work to achieve.
2. **High quality teaching** consisting of:
 - good relations with interesting and encouraging tutors, who give helpful feedback;
 - high quality academically-focused discussions of relevant knowledge as part of well designed courses
 - Support to overcome obstacles to study.

The complexities of quality: processes

Scale	Ranking of universities
Engagement with academic knowledge	Selective, Diversity, Prestige, Community
Good Teaching	Diversity, Community, Selective, Prestige

(*Institutions in **Red** have scores that are significantly higher than those in **Blue**)

Implications for policy and practices

Our research:

- offers students' engagement with academic knowledge in transformative ways as an alternative way of thinking about quality;
- questions the portrayal of students as simply 'consumers';
- questions whether UK league tables and KIS (key information sets) data give students valid information about the quality of prospective courses
- **But how does this help develop a positive alternative?**

Focusing on 'knowledge'

- Bernstein's (2000) notion of the 'pedagogic device' can be seen to relate to three versions of knowledge:
 - Knowledge-as-research;
 - Knowledge-as-curriculum;
 - Knowledge-as-student-produced-text(see Ashwin et al 2012 for an exploration of these distinctions).
- Knowledge is transformed as it moves between these three forms.
- Possible development of alternatives to the market model of quality is to think about the relations between these different forms of knowledge.
- Need to think about the place of different kinds of academic knowledge in the relations between HEIs, academics and students

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