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## **The student experience and subject engagement in UK sociology: a proposed typology**

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This article is a contribution to the sociology of an expanded and newly diversified UK higher education system. How differentiated is the student experience? How sharply is the system polarised? Drawing on interviews and questionnaires conducted in five sociology departments in a variety of pre-1992 and post-1992 universities, it examines students' views on 'what they learn' and their orientations to study. It explores differences in curriculum content and organisation and the extent to which student narratives and identities vary with differences in institutional context. A typology of student experiences and subject engagement is advanced that as well as capturing institutional differences also locates a range of student orientations – and worthwhile student experiences – in all five departments that suggests a somewhat greater commonality of experience and outcome across institutions than the extreme polarisation of institutional experiences and outcomes sometimes suggest.

**Keywords:** higher education; student experience; institutional stratification; subject identity; sociology

### **Introduction**

The social and educational context of this article is the massification and diversification of higher education and an accompanying paradigm shift in the sociology of higher education, and in the sociology of students more specifically.

Our motivation for developing a new typology of undergraduate student engagement in a specific subject area is twofold:

- (1) At least until the 1990s, no strong tradition in the sociology of students existed in the United Kingdom. Instead the main academic focus on students has been 'psycho-educational', a dominant paradigm centred on a relatively decontextualised study of learning styles and outcomes (Deem 2004). Relatively little impetus is evident for any depth of sociological attention to either subject differences or institutional diversity.
- (2) By the 1990s, rapidly increasing higher education participation accompanied by growing institutional diversity meant an increasing diversity of student backgrounds as well as new programmes of study and more varied educational environments. Psycho-educational researchers have reacted to this with

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greater attention to variations in ‘learning environments’ (Trigwell and Prosser 1991; Ramsden 1997), while a new wave of sociological studies has seen a focus on ‘non-traditional’ students from previously under-represented socio-economic and ethnic minority groups, and a focus also on the institutional and other barriers to their participation in higher education (for example, Ball et al. 2002; Reay, David, and Ball 2003). However, this has not been accompanied by any parallel increase in study of sociological interest in mainstream students in mainstream institutions.

Such a limitation in research concerns would appear to be missing out on any exploration of the possibility of overall changes in the typical student experience (if anything like this still exists) and in student profiles. For some commentators (Haggis 2003; Webb 1997), psycho-educational studies of ‘student learning’ have remained oriented to paradigms and models of student experience that fail to reflect the new diversity of experiences, whilst the new sociological studies have often appeared reluctant to explore a generally increased complexity of student orientations in the student body as a whole. In both groups of studies, although an institutional context to the student experience is assumed, the more complex disciplinary and social matrices of socialisation tend to be ignored, or at best are caricatured or polarised – ‘elite students in elite universities’ enjoying a ‘holistic’ experience and engaging in ‘deep learning’, as opposed to the fragmented lives of economically, culturally and educationally poorer (also ‘surface learning’) students, found especially in post-1992 universities. Because they have largely ignored any systematic subject-based and institutionally linked comparison of the social experience of learning, both sets of studies have tended to ignore the possibility of a far more complex dual process of diversification and individualisation (of experiences, expectations and identities) on the one hand, but also a degree of continuing commonality of learning experiences and outcomes across institutions on the other. These are the possibilities that we explore in our examination of sociology students in five institutions.

### **Dubet’s student typology**

The typology we will present builds on the work of the French sociologist Francois Dubet.<sup>1</sup> The typology Dubet devised in 1994 is grounded in a set of empirical studies looking at the student experience in the late 1980s and early 1990s (Dubet 1994), and seeks to redress what he saw as an outdated conceptualisation of student identities in a French sociology still dominated by the cultural and social ‘reproduction’ paradigm introduced by Bourdieu and Passeron in 1964 (Dubet 2000).

The university, according to Dubet, is both a ‘massified’ (high number of students and relatively low impact on student behaviour and strategies) and an ‘atomised’ world (diversity of origins, trajectories and projects), which is not seen as contradictory. Dubet suggests that it is extremely difficult in this context to determine sociologically student profiles by disciplines and fields beyond a caricatured opposition between the ‘bourgeois’ medical student with his or her ‘science-oriented’ background and the student in arts and social sciences from a lower-middle-class background with a philosophy *baccalauréat*. However, Dubet (1994, 512) considers that in between these two types there lies a wide range of options, of behaviours, of trajectories that more traditional surveys focused simply on the impact of social determinants no longer grasp. It is therefore in the relation of students to their studies – in

Table 1. Typology of individual student orientations in sociology.

	Vocation (engagement) +	Vocation (engagement) +	Vocation (engagement) –	Vocation (engagement) –
Project +	Type 1. The archetypical student	Type 2. The engaged non-traditional experience	Type 3. First form of strategic engagement	Type 4. Second form of strategic engagement
Project –	Type 5. Open-minded engagement Integration +	Type 6. Detached engagement Integration –	Type 7. Brand-seeking orientation Integration +	Type 8. A case of anomy Integration –

addition to any social determination and contextual influence – that one should seek the principles of identification and of construction of student experiences.

Dubet's typology of student experiences in a mass higher education system is based on the combination of three dimensions:

- the nature of the personal project,
- the degree of integration in the university life, and
- the level of intellectual engagement with the subject.

According to Dubet, the combination of positive and negative values on the three dimensions – giving eight types of student experience, referred to by Dubet as 'ways of being student' – captures differences in the subjective orientations to higher education of students whilst also reflecting the wider influence of the higher education market. Our own version of these eight 'ways of being student' as discussed below is presented in Table 1. As we also will, Dubet emphasises the fluidity, the change over time of student locations within the typology, especially in the intermediate positions Type 2–Type 7.

### **Our use of Dubet's typology in an analysis of sociology student orientations and institutional contexts**

While Dubet's typology was intended to reflect the complex positioning of academic subjects, institutions and individuals within a massified higher education system as a whole, our use of this typology aims to represent such diversification of experiences within one subject across the spectrum of UK university environments. Dubet's empirical analysis finds pronounced differences between subjects, with students with weak 'projects' or an absence of these, and with weak 'integration', most likely to study sociology and the humanities. In contrast, our typology applied to our five departments leads us to suggest that the entire range of combinations is likely to be found among sociology students in any UK department, but that such orientations are neither evenly distributed across institutions nor strongly concentrated in particular departments. We suggest that such a typology will help to obviate any over-sharp picture of institutional and social polarisation in discussion of UK higher education (e.g. 'pre-1992'–'post-1992' universities, 'white middle class'–'non-traditional').

Our data are derived from the ESRC-funded SOMUL project,<sup>2</sup> which sought to explore how students' conceptions of learning and personal, subject and professional identity are 'socially and organisationally mediated' via the social context of study and the principles of curriculum organisation. Our analysis draws on repeated student

interviews and focus group discussions, supplemented by findings from a questionnaire to final year students, institutional documents and interviews and feedback sessions with academic staff, in five sociology ‘departments’/‘sites’<sup>3</sup> across the United Kingdom. The questionnaire data relate to students’ perceptions of what they have learnt from their studies (based on the Quality Assurance Agency subject benchmarks<sup>4</sup>) and to students’ approaches to learning.<sup>5</sup>

Figure 1 locates our five sites/departments in terms of two primary dimensions: student recruitment (based on Higher Education Statistical Agency data) and curriculum type. Our conception of curriculum type as a ‘closed’ or ‘open’ classification and framing of knowledge draws on Bernstein’s model involving two dimensions, the classification and framing of the curriculum, resulting in two codes (Bernstein 2000). Whereas a collection code – in circumscribing a relatively closed discipline or ‘subject’ – involves strong classification and strong ongoing by staff control of the framing of knowledge, an integrated code has open boundaries, involves integration with other areas of knowledge and includes vocational applications (Rustin 1981). There are parallels here with the distinction between Mode 1 and Mode 2 drawn by

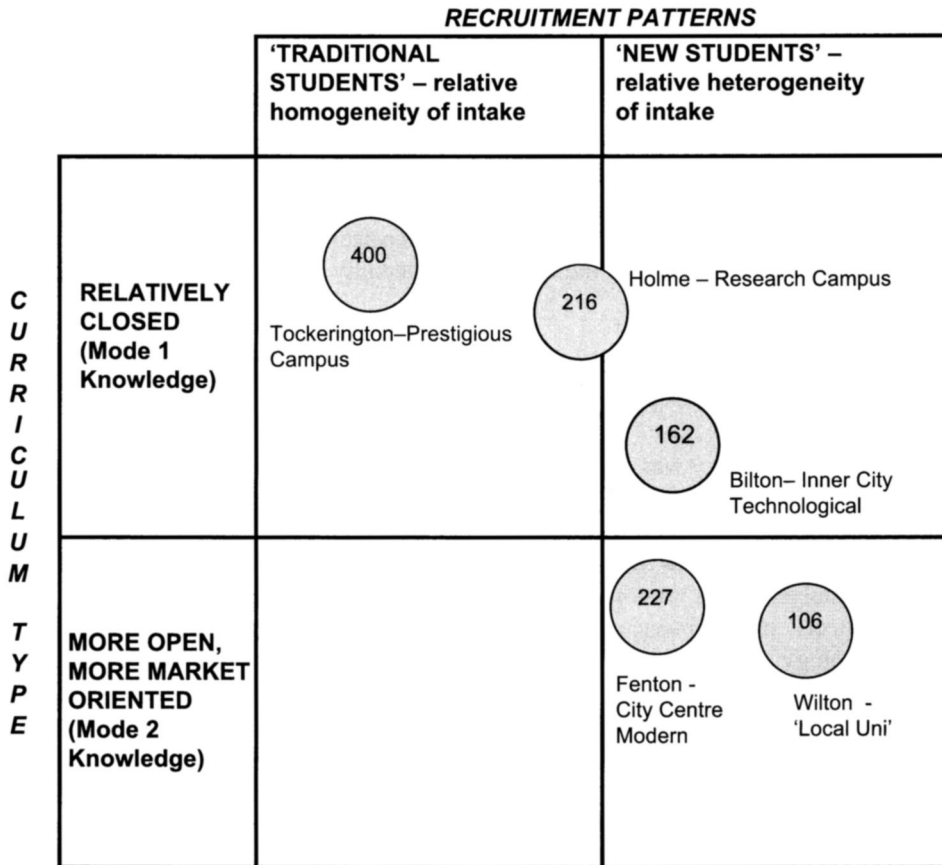


Figure 1. Curriculum type and student recruitment.  
 Note: Numbers in circles indicate undergraduate enrolment in sociology (single and joint honours) in 2004/05.  
 Source: Higher Education Statistical Agency.

Gibbons et al. (1994). Vocational or professional courses, such as Business Studies or Social Work, plainly involve Mode 2 knowledge, but Mode 2 elements in Sociology provision mostly stop well short of this extent of occupational linkage.

Following Becker's conceptualisation of 'constructed types' as 'planned selection of the empirical given' (Becker 1968; Ragin 1987), the eight types of student orientations and related social and organisational mediations presented in our version of the Dubet typology are empirically grounded in a Nvivo-based analysis of student and institutional attributes (age, gender, type of institution, curriculum mode, etc.) and the Dubetian dimensions (student aspirations and intellectual engagement, integration in campus life, etc.). Our eight constructed types are not intended to fix individuals as having static identities and trajectories. Just as the 'ways of being student' in a given university can vary a great deal, so can they vary over a student's career. Partly for this reason, our presentation of the eight types is conceptual and descriptive and our identification of students is illustrative without the objective of any precise quantification of the incidence of types across departments.

More fully defined, the three dimensions of Dubet's typology can be related to SOMUL data in the following way.

### *Personal project*

By 'personal project' is meant a subjective perception of the usefulness and value of studying, a cost/benefit evaluation of the particular programme undertaken at a particular university at a particular point in time. Personal projects also may, or may not, take shape in the course of studies:

Hopefully I'll be starting to decide by then (in Year 3) exactly what kind of career I'm definitely going to go into, although I do think there's a very limited choice of careers in Sociology and it's very hard to get into certain careers as well. I mean as a Sociologist, well to be Sociologist, it's going to be hard to find an actual job ... there's loads of things you have to do before you can get there. And also at the moment I'm thinking hopefully after graduation I'll go on to postgraduate degree and carry on Sociology there as well. (Farzana, Year 1, Fenton)

The project may reflect a process of identity affirmation *vis-à-vis* students' family or other forms of authority and control:

Yeah I mean they [parents] do ask me if I'm doing my work and stuff and ... that you've got to get a good degree for a good job and everything like that. But I'm quite determined to get in the Public Sector, like doing work with Young Offenders fulltime. They'd like me to do something which is a bit better paid but as long as they know that I'm enjoying it and I'm happy in my job then I think they're fully supportive. And they always ask me about how my volunteer work is going and stuff like that. (Zozia, Year 3, Fenton)

Projects may take the form of *professional projects* (such as becoming a teacher, entering the probationary service), *educational projects* where the studies remain the essential finality of the project (getting a degree, studying for the sake of it, etc.), and the *absence of project*.

The absence of a project or vagueness about it is as significant to the typology as well-thought-out strategies, and must be interpreted in relation to the notion of

engagement below. Contrary to students in more vocational subjects, students in sociology commonly combine a certain intellectual engagement with an ostentatious absence of project.

I think, I've really enjoyed this year, I think I've learned a lot academically and I think it has been useful for me [...] then hopefully I will be able to use it, but at the moment I can't see how useful it's going to be. (Kate, Year 3, Tockerington)

### ***Integration (academic and non academic)***

This refers to a student's knowledge of the subject group organisation, to the level of involvement or non-involvement in the departmental life and beyond, and to the involvement in student social life. Of the three dimensions, the typology 'integration' is the clearest indicator of the hold or not of the university as an organisation on students' social interactions and socialisation. The structure of academic units (departments, subject groups, pedagogies, etc.) and the spatial organisation of the campus (city centre and 'borderless' or 'self-contained' campus) are powerful drivers of integration or non-integration:

We actually spend quite a lot of time in the library together and discussing things and just sitting in the café and I haven't really gone around the campus that much. But yeah the Sociology building we're here all the time! (Amelia, Year 1, Tockerington)

### ***Engagement***

Dubet uses the term 'vocation' (in Weber's sense of a passionate commitment) to characterise the intellectual interest that students have in their studies. Our notion of engagement broadens this to include students' level of engagement with their subject in terms of their involvement and active participation in subject-related learning activities, and how this evolves over time. It also includes the importance they grant to their studies in terms of ethics, knowledge, critical thinking and personal development. In sociology, with its preponderance of female students, this often specifically includes issues of gender, as in the following from our interviews:

As a woman I like the fact in Sociology that you're often faced with ... things you take for granted and like thoughts I've had about myself as a woman are challenged and it opens your eyes to a hell of a lot of new things. And you think every day the things you read in the news or the things you, the way you see people interacting. The things people say to me I can see that they are a product of either discourse or their environment and I really enjoy that. (Lynne, Year 1, Wilton)

Engagement as an intellectual orientation is different from the 'personal project' (simply wanting a degree or a basis for career) and may be evident in cases of absence of project. A degree of engagement is perceptible in most student discourses, but may sometimes be expressed in negative terms (the 'absence of debates', the 'intellectual emptiness of a department', the narrow instrumentalism of fellow students, etc.). The engagement may actually take the form of a critique of teaching practices expressed in differences between what students think they should learn and what they are taught ('I have learned more from the books I read than from the tutorials and courses'). The interrelation of 'project' and 'engagement' can be a key aspect of individual perceptions of what is learned and of the factors influencing them.

### Student orientations in sociology

Our identification of eight types of student orientations generated by the three factors suggested by Dubet is presented in Table 1. The typology also indicates what we see as typical correlated institutional and social and organisational mediations, even though we are unable to quantify empirically the incidence of each type within departments. This may be seen as the main limitation of a construction drawing largely on qualitative data: we are able to say that all types but one were encountered in the course of this research and we can suggest the kind of academic and socio-economic environments where each type is likely to be dominant, but the presentation below does not illustrate all eight positions with equal level of precision because, as in most qualitative studies, the research did not always succeed in reaching the ‘hard to reach’ (more likely to represent certain ‘types’). Nevertheless, we think that it is important to report on each identified way of being a sociology student in an article that seeks to highlight the processes generating the types rather than report on their quantitative occurrences.

#### *Type 1: the archetypical student*

- Project +
- Engagement +
- Integration +

A student – perhaps corresponding to the traditional ‘ideal’ student but not actually typical of many traditional students – characterised by a clear project as well as subject engagement and involvement in student activities:

I think actually for me being at university has been a lot more than just my course although that’s a very important part for me. You know it’s the whole experience of being here. The chance you get to do different things that you wouldn’t ever have done at work. And the things I’ve been able to do in the summer holidays for example. If I had gone straight into work I wouldn’t have got you know three months off you know to go and do that. So I guess I see that all linked in together yeah. (Catherine, Year 3, single-honours sociology, Holme)

#### *Illustration*

A student doing single-honours sociology at Holme, a research-oriented university, a member of the staff–student liaison committee, volunteers for the resource centre, lives on campus, a member of student societies, wants to become a teacher, buys books when she can afford to, irritates her dad with her critical stance on everything and constant references to feminist theories. Thinks highly of her lecturers (is proud to see their names on the textbooks in bookshops).

#### *Typical social and organisational matrices*

Although a Type 1 orientation is by no means predetermined by institutional and organisational mediations, institutional and departmental structures may facilitate the orientation, for example: ‘spatial markers’ (self-contained campus, departmental common room, departmental library, sociology society, etc.). May also be a student



with 'good' A-levels (also often in sociology); parents may be graduates, interested in subject reputation as well as institutional reputation and cultural capital.

*Learning orientations and approaches to study and perceptions of outcomes*

Deep rather than surface learning, with strong endorsement of sociology benchmark outcomes.

***Type 2: the engaged non-traditional experience***

- Project +
- Engagement +
- Integration –

Characteristic of some mature students and crucially different from Type 1 in the relatively high levels of subject engagement and project (e.g. to change status or job) but lower levels of integration. Where such students socialise at university it is often with other mature students.

*Illustration*

A low-integration mature student 'on one of these moments when she feels like giving up':

if ever I'd come close to giving this up it was then. I was in a room full of students that knew what they were doing. And the lecturer is not a lecturer that I normally have so she didn't know me, I didn't know her and I felt stupid and it was very difficult and as a grown woman I nearly cried. It was awful. I felt completely humiliated and isolated and I just thought this is too big, this is too enormous a situation for me to be able to deal with ... (Sarah, Year 1 sociology/history joint, Fenton)

In Year 3, disengagement from student activities can be a deliberate choice to concentrate on the final-year dissertation and examinations, but project and engagement can be high:

I mean I already know that I want to carry on what I'm doing. I feel like I've just started now. I've really got an interest in it and I found out about a certain area of knowledge ... and I want to carry on with it and if I don't do a post graduate then it will still be something that I will read about. (Wendy, Year 3, Bilton)

*Typical social and organisational matrices*

The organisation of the curriculum – that is, its framing and control – does not appear a decisive factor one way or the other, perhaps because 'non-traditional' students are more commonly found in new universities where the structure is more openly modular and students can exert greater choice. Neither is departmental and institutional or departmental spatial organisation a key dimension as these students often have to commute from home, while frequently continuing with family commitments, leaving little surplus time for wider university life.

*Learning orientations and approaches to study and perceptions of outcomes*

The student shows high engagement, but may be concerned about their ability to meet the requirements of the course; often high expectations and perhaps pressure from outside. There may also be a tendency to follow strictly the learning and reading advice and demands of the lecturers. Getting a degree is important. The achievement of benchmark outcomes is recognised. Given that overall integration is low, academic networking with other mature students can be important.

***Types 3 and 4: two forms of strategic engagement***

- Project +
- Engagement –
- Integration + or –

‘Student instrumentalism’ is widely seen, and largely in negative terms, by the staff we interviewed as increasingly a feature of student orientations in a massified system in which higher education participation is no longer the preserve of an ‘academic elite’ and where the ‘project’ may be more narrowly career centred. We have grouped under this category students with low subject engagement who reported on strategies regarding their choice of programme in relation to expected future prospects, including employment. Such students have a clear particular or general professional project, but express relatively limited personal interest in the subject:

since about the age of 14 I’ve always wanted to go into the police force ... you know if you get a degree and you join the army, the police service, then you basically go through as an officer after you proved training so you earn more money and it’s a career with a good retirement as well, paid in full by the government so. (Tom, Year 1 sociology/criminology, Fenton)

Two types are involved. Type 4 is differentiated from Type 3 by lower levels of integration – lower levels of involvement in departmental life or in extra-curricular activities with other students – and this type can be seen as more problematic as an orientation to study than Type 3. In neither case is academic engagement strong in comparison with Types 1 and 2 or Types 5 and 6.

*Illustration*

Typical are two students on joint honours programmes at Fenton and at Wilton:

I don’t know necessarily that a degree will help ... but if you have a degree, any degree after your 2 years of working in the police you can apply and you can get fast track promotion. So I don’t necessarily say the Sociology will help me but the actual degree will be a help. (Rob, Year 3 Sociology/International Relations, Fenton)

I only did Sociology because I had to do it for Criminology. If I could have done Criminology by itself I would have done. So yeah, Sociology is not something I’m utterly interested in. I don’t mind modern day Sociology stuff, which has a relevance, but there is some old Sociology and I have no interest in it at all. (Year 3 Sociology/Criminology, Wilton)

*Typical social and organisational matrices*

Institutional location and curriculum organisation appears to be a factor on this configuration, where relatively low subject engagement (Type 3) and also weak integration (Type 4) may be associated with a more open modular curriculum organisation (i.e. weaker ‘classification’ and ‘framing’). Thus at least to some extent, strategic instrumentalism of either type may particularly characterise student experiences and approaches to learning on less subject-oriented, more vocationally oriented programmes in post-1992 ‘recruiting universities’. However, forms of strategic instrumentalism were found in all universities (see also our discussion of Type 7). In this respect, parallels can perhaps be drawn with the widespread strategic behaviour found in Becker, Geer, and Hughes’ (1968) seminal sociological study of Kansas students, for a majority of whom ‘making the grade’ outstripped the importance of any more specific commitment to the academic values of subjects or the ‘faculty’.

*Learning orientations and approaches to study and perceptions of outcomes*

Some evidence of less engaged, more ‘surface learning’ orientations was found, for example, with students taking sociology and criminology, whose interest in a broader sociological understanding of crime related issues only grew as courses progressed:

I have got to admit when I first decided I wanted to do Criminology because I have always been ... interested in reading like books about crime ... I have really enjoyed it you know, but it is obviously more about the social aspect of crime and ... how the society kind of causes crime in a way, but [I still] think the interest lies, it has got a lot to do with, the media reporting of crime. (Tom, Year 3, sociology/criminology, Fenton)

***Type 5: open-minded engagement***

- Project –
- Engagement +
- Integration +

Students who are engaged with their subject or subjects and integrated into their departments and/or institutions but where a definite ‘project’ is less in evidence. A student in a research-intensive department provides an example:

I came to study this degree because I just love [the subject] so I am sure I wouldn’t stop reading and taking an interest even if my career doesn’t take me down a very strictly sociological path per se ... (Catherine, Year 3, Holme)

We found some resemblance (particularly in the character of the confident intellectual engagement with the course and in a drawing on pre-existing cultural capital) between this type and the stereotype of the ‘bourgeois’ student in Bourdieu’s *Inheritors* (Bourdieu and Passeron 1979).

*Illustration*

Responding to an inquiry about future plans, a student illustrates how the absence of a personal project that can be associated with open-minded engagement:

Because I don't know what occupation I actually want to take up yet, I don't want to go into further training that would lock me in for another 2-3 years or another course. When I came to university I didn't know what I wanted to be when I left. That is why I chose a Joint Degree which is quite broad. Sociology & Psychology is really broad and I still don't know what I want to do so I'm just going to have a year out and try and decide. (Marie, Year 3, Fenton)

#### *Typical social and organisational matrices*

Notwithstanding the above example, a strongly bounded curriculum and departmental structure may facilitate both engagement and integration (at the subject level). So also may also a relatively homogeneous 'traditional' student body and limited student 'parallel experience'. Broader campus-wide integration may or may not be strong.

#### *Learning orientations and approaches to study and perceptions of outcomes*

Deep learning, high personal interest in the subject and autonomy in reading around the subject.

#### **Type 6: detached engagement**

- Project –
- Engagement +
- Integration –

With strong engagement but relatively little expression of project, there are elements again here of the typical figure of the *Inheritors*, but the relatively low levels of integration mark this off from Type 5. A student discussing course content with other students:

it's just that it's very difficult finding people at this university that are actually interested in talking about the course. A lot of people are just so apathetic or so indifferent to what we are doing they never talk about it. It's only when I find people with sort of my sort of level of interest that I actually will talk about it and that's very rare. There's only one boy in my sociology class I can have a sociological debate with. I don't know why they bother doing sociology. (Jenny, Year 1 sociology/politics, Holme)

#### *Illustration*

The above Holme student, who feels she has got little to share with other students, is also very critical of the tutors. But she thinks highly of the subject and its challenging nature. This pattern also characterises those mature students (e.g. at Wilton and at Bilton) studying sociology for its own sake, and really enjoying the subject, but feeling somewhat marginalised:

I would have liked to have done the degree you know eight years ago when I was young before kids and have fun and go to the union and do that kind of stuff. But no I don't think I'm missing out now because I can't drink and drive anyway so! It's the thing now. It would have been fun to do it younger but I am not worried about it. (Alison, Year 1, Wilton)

*Typical social and organisational matrices*

A relatively well-defined subject territory, but not necessarily a self-contained campus as the level of integration is low.

*Learning orientations and approaches to study and perceptions of outcomes*

The predominant interest and outcome for these students relates to critical thinking, which they also apply to the assessment of their learning environment!

**Type 7: brand-seeking orientation**

- Project –
- Engagement –
- Integration +

This pattern can be framed as a distinctive – ‘elite’ – case of instrumentalism: an orientation arising from the choice of a ‘high reputation’ university being uppermost. A specific project is not greatly emphasised; nor is there any pronounced engagement with the subject. Choice of a high-reputation university and consumption of the university brand appears uppermost, and integration into the university culture is strong.

*Illustration*

A student speaking of her parents’ influence on her choice of where to go asserts:

I just chose that from what I liked and didn’t like. But they sort of guided me towards the better university, right to this one compared to the other ones. (Kate, Year 1, Tockerington)

A second student suggests:

‘t’s a good university, so wherever I go on from graduating I’ll, I can tell already that I go to a good university, so its obvious that people see it as a credential which you know is very good for you and everything like that. But in terms of my experience of doing Sociology I don’t think, I don’t think this would be the best place for Sociology. (Helen, Year 3, Tockerington)

The orientation is further illustrated by many Tockerington students who minimise the role of the subject in their student life and in their career, and by students whose essential goal was to become a student and end up being more involved in the student union and other campus activities than in their studies. The ambivalence but ultimate acceptance of a positioning of ‘self’ that accompanies this type of orientation in students studying a general rather than a vocational subject is instanced by the comment that:

I kind of wish I had gone for something more career orientated or more – I don’t know – more something that’s perceived as being more academic I think. I feel as though a stigma attached to Sociology, that it’s a bit wishy-washy. People don’t really know what it is and I don’t know if that will benefit me. Whether it will work to my disadvantage when I try and get into the workplace ... A least I went to the right university ... But

yeah I do wish that I had a bit more direction I had chosen something that was related directly to something I wanted to do. (Liam, Year 3, Tockerington)

‘Bourgeois’ origins and destinations are often a factor making Type 7, which can be seen as a further example of Bourdieuan inheritance and ‘cultural reproduction’. But it can also represent a clear aspiration to upward cultural mobility.

#### *Typical social and organisational matrices*

A relatively homogeneous population of young middle-class students fully aware of the unequal cultural and social esteem and market value of degrees. Students with A-levels falling short of those required for entry to high-prestige subjects in high-status institutions may present themselves as having chosen a lower-status – more ‘dubious’ or ‘softer’ – subject as a means of gaining entry a higher-status university they could otherwise not aspire to. Also a relative indifference to the subject and an absence of specificity of project and a valuation of the wider university experience. There exist further parallels here with Becker, Geer, and Hughes’ (1968) Kansas students, for whom membership of fraternities, whilst also ‘making the grade’, outstripped any wider academic commitment or commitment to subject.

#### *Learning orientations and approaches to study and perceptions of outcomes*

Sometimes a more strategic surface orientation to learning. In some respects close to Type 3, but with importance granted to the fact of ‘doing well’ in the sense of gaining a good degree from a ‘good’ university in part to counteract an ‘other-than-first choice’ choice of choice.

#### ***Type 8: a case of anomy***

- Project –
- Engagement –
- Integration –

The polar opposite to Type 1, which Dubet presents as an ‘extreme’ manifestation of a mass higher education system. Said to be associated with a ‘depressive’ student experience – students who may have made a wrong choice, high drop-out rates, low integration because of socio-cultural barriers, and so forth.

#### *Illustration*

Perhaps because such students withdraw from courses, or are likely otherwise to be non-respondents in social research, we have no illustration of this type. Such students are less likely to respond to questionnaires present themselves for face-to-face interviews. Our interview transcripts do not contain a clear example of this type among continuing students.

#### *Learning orientations, approaches to study and perceptions of outcomes*

A Type 8 orientation may represent the position of at least some withdrawing and failing students (perhaps particularly disengaged younger male students). The likelihood

of anomic disengagement as a student orientation was raised in our interviews and feedback sessions with academic and support staff. However, our data suggest that in UK sociology such students may not be as numerous as Dubet suggests for France or as some UK commentators suspect.

### Conclusions

Using an adapted version of Dubet's conceptualisation of student experience and engagement we have identified eight types of student orientation in UK sociology. We have also provided an indication of how organisational, institutional and social mediations contribute to shaping these types. This empirically informed typology accommodates the diversity of 'ways of being a student' in sociology in a massified and stratified higher education system – thus allowing the discussion of important subject and system differences.

Recalling the importance of context in qualitative studies, what then are the overall differences between our account and Dubet's? Whilst Dubet established a strong correlation between the weakness of institutional controls and low levels of student engagement, our data indicate stronger institutional and, we would say, especially disciplinary framing of the curriculum.<sup>6</sup> In contrast with Dubet in France, sociology students in the United Kingdom seem to be engaged in university learning in a range of different and, we argue, mainly 'viable' ways. This conclusion is also supported by students' wide agreement in the SOMUL survey that sociology's specified subject benchmark outcomes are largely being achieved (Jary and Lebeau 2006).

To elaborate further on this, while Dubet refers to the weakness of institutional controls and low levels of student engagement, our data suggest that in the UK context the impact of disciplinary cultures in the control of curriculum formation of student identities can counteracts some of the adverse potential implications of 'massification' and the tendency to greater institutional polarisation. The existence of a shared teaching and research culture sociology departments in both pre-1992 and post-1992 institutions is strongly emphasised by sociology staff. We believe that the commonalities in the way the subject is taught in different status institutions are sustained in part by the retention of this strong, shared disciplinary culture among sociology staff. This is despite changes in the organisation and the content of the modern-day sociological curriculum (Scott 2005). Such commonality is seen in the ways that students generally talk about what they learn, and their repeated references to the importance of the 'sociological imagination' in their personal development and social and ethical awareness. This is not to suggest that undergraduate sociology students in the United Kingdom enjoy an identical pattern of provision across all institutions. A good deal of differentiation of the sociology student experiences exists between institutions, both in relation to campus experience and variations in curriculum type. However, even where the curriculum has been diversified – for example, labels such as 'Crime and Society' or 'Media and Society' – programmes remain recognisably framed as 'sociology' or in sociological terms. In Bernstein's terms (and in relation to Figure 1), curriculum closure and control remains relatively strong. And a range of student orientations is found in all five of our institutions.

We do not dismiss outright the views of a significant number of academic staff we interviewed that there is a declining commitment among students (and also therefore greater challenges in teaching). However, the generality of our research findings – the student rather than the staff voices we report – does not support a picture of low commitment to study or unsatisfactory outcomes. Academic staff or 'faculty' seem

eternally to have voiced regret that student orientations and aspirations are different from their own. However, comparisons with the findings of earlier studies (for example, Marris 1964; Becker, Geer, and Hughes 1968) do not support assumptions about an earlier 'golden age' when student orientations were markedly different from the range today.

We would like to conclude with three brief suggestions regarding practice, further research and higher education policy. A first suggestion is that the student experience would be likely to benefit from a greater recognition by academic staff of the viability and validity of the range of students orientations in the modern academy. As a corollary of this, a second suggestion is that the empirical purchase of our typology and the 'social and organisational mediation' paradigm that underpins it should be further explored in other disciplines.<sup>7</sup> For example we would expect to find stronger personal projects in business studies and biosciences and somewhat greater integration for biosciences and subjects where class contact hours are high. But our expectation would also be to find a similar range of student orientations across institutions and subjects. Our third suggestion is that, at a time when there is a rising policy pressure for increasing institutional differentiation (which fails to address the disbenefits and inequities this brings), our findings indicate the value of working to preserve subject-related cultural commonalities in the student experience while acknowledging and making the most of the diversity of student orientations within subjects and institutions.

## Notes

1. Our thanks to Francois Dubet for his comments on an early version of this article, but the viewpoints expressed are, of course, our own.
2. *What is Learned at University. The Social and Organisational Mediation of University Learning* (SOMUL). The project was funded as part of the Teaching and Learning Research Programme (RES-139-25-0109) of the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC). The full proposal and subsequent project working papers are available from the project website: <http://www.open.ac.uk/cheri/pages/CHERI-Projects-SOMUL.shtml> (accessed May 2009).
3. 'Department' refers to the basic organisational structure within which students are located, which for some of our cases is other than the traditional department.
4. For a discussion of subject benchmarks see Jary (2002) and Wisby (2002).
5. In establishing students' approaches to study, we used 10 items from the Approaches to Learning and Studying scale devised for use in the ESRC TLRP project on Enhancing Teaching-Learning Environments. These were intended to measure the extent to which students tended to use a 'deep approach' based on understanding the meaning of course materials, or a 'surface approach'. Our findings in sociology reveal that individuals are often strategic and may change over time and from module to module. We also found that differences in 'deep' and 'surface' learning between sites were not pronounced. See Richardson and Edmunds (2007) for further details and comparisons across the SOMUL subjects.
6. In contrast, the relatively weak disciplinary framing of undergraduate sociology in the USA is seen by Nespor (2007) as making sociology a relatively soft 'major'.
7. The potential value of other typologies and framework must also be acknowledged. Bernstein, for example, examines student types of 'involvement' in terms of acceptance or rejection of the school's instrumental and expressive orders (see the use made of his framework in a school-based case-study approach in Power et al. 1998).

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