

**HE Policy:  
What can we learn from surveys such as those reported in ‘Academically  
Adrift’?**

This paper explores possible ways of assessing ‘learning gain’ for undergraduates, comparing UK initiatives with the approach used and reported in the US study of higher education reported by Richard Arum and Josipa Roksa in ***Academically Adrift: limited learning on College Campuses*** (The University of Chicago Press, 2011). Recent relevant literature and similar studies in the UK and abroad are explored, to consider if there would be value (or not) in undertaking a similar sort of survey in the UK.

***Academically Adrift*** has attracted a good deal of attention in the US and abroad, largely because of its startling conclusion that ‘American higher education is characterized by limited or no learning for a large proportion of students, and persistent or growing inequalities over time’ (p30). The study was based on a sample of results from the Collegiate Learning Assessment tool (CLA) of over 2,322 students at 24 US higher education institutions. The headline findings were that, after one year of College, 45% of students showed no significant improvement in learning ie in enhanced reasoning and writing skills (as measured by CLA) with the figure reducing to 36% after four years.

The authors consider a range of variables affecting student performance: academic and social experiences, contact time, student time use, finance; ‘academic preparation’ and ‘sociodemographic characteristics’. This multivariate analysis leads to ‘recommendations for improved educational practices at the institutional level as well as policy changes that are focused at the system level’ for the US (p.125). Policy makers in the UK have noted this study, to include findings and recommendations, with interest.

***The UK Context***

In contemplating transferability of methodology and/or approach, there are a number of points that need to be taken into account. Firstly, it is important to note the differences between higher education in the USA and in the UK, which would influence a similar UK study. For example, the earlier subject specialisation in the UK would make the assessment of the generic skills measured by the CLA less appropriate than for students undertaking a more generalist liberal arts education and later specialisation in the US, with its four-year undergraduate degree programmes, followed by specialist graduate school education.

Secondly, the UK QAA’s Quality Code for Higher Education provides assurance of the academic standards of UK awards and programmes and of the quality of student learning opportunities. There is no equivalent in the US. In particular, it is worth stressing that the Quality Code embraces the system of External Examining, which is

designed to ensure comparability of awards at discipline level – with lack of comparability or standards in US HE as criticised in **Academically Adrift**. In addition, Professional Statutory and Review Boards ensure the comparability of professional standards, and subject benchmark statements indicate the outcomes expected of graduates in each discipline.

### **Relevant studies in the UK**

There is no equivalent large scale UK study of improvement in ‘learning gain’, using a measure similar to CLA - that is, psychometric measures of generic educational outcomes such as tests of critical thinking. Also UK studies tend to concentrate on one or more variables rather than the multivariate approach adopted in *Academically Adrift*. Such studies are highlighted below.

There are a number of studies which explore the ‘**learning gain**’ resulting from a higher education experience: *Dimensions of Quality* (Graham Gibbs, HEA 2010) *Implications of ‘Dimensions of Quality’ in a market environment, HEA 2012 forthcoming*); *What is Learned at University? The Social and Organisational Mediation of University Learning (SOMUL)* (2009); *Assessment of HE Learning Outcomes* (AHELO). All flag up a range of factors.

A number of other recent studies have explored the **student experience** of higher education, such as *The Academic Experience of Students in English Universities – 2012 Report* (Bahram Bekhradnia, 2012), *Diversity in the student learning experience and time devoted to study: a comparative analysis of the UK and European evidence* (CHERI, 2009), *Explaining Contact Hours: Guidance for institutions providing public information about higher education in the UK* (QAA, 2011); *Student Experience Research 2012: First Year Student Experience*, (NUS, 2012). The partnership between the NUS and QAA has also produced three further reports on Teaching and Learning; Independent Learning and Contact Hours; and Subject Differences.

**Race and ethnicity** continues to be cause concern in the UK, with various accounts and interventions to enhance student performance being documented: *Black and Minority Ethnic Student Degree Retention and Attainment* (Jacqueline Stevenson); *Student Ethnicity. Profile and Progression of entrants to full-time, first degree study* (HEFCE, 2010); *Race for Equality. A report on the experiences of Black students in further and higher education* (National Union of Students, 2011). The HEA continues to work with and support the sector in addressing the well documented issues.

**Employability** of UK graduates has been and continues to be evaluated in a number of ways that don’t appear to take place in the US: *The Destinations of Leavers from HE (DLHE) survey*; The UK Employer Skills Survey, 2011); *Access to What? Improving Employment Prospects for Graduates from Socially Disadvantaged Groups* (CHERI, 2003); *Reflex 2008*.

There is a danger of **survey and data collection** overload in the UK. For example, the Higher Education Statistical Agency HESA) collects data on annual basis on

particular variables illustrating student performance in the UK including the following:

- Widening Participation
- Non-continuation rates
- Module completion rates
- Employment of leavers (see DLHE above)

And finally, the Higher Education Funding Council for England oversees the annual **National Student Survey**, which collects feedback from students towards the end of their programme on a range of aspects of the student experience.

In conclusion, the above may suggest rather than duplicating a study from the US, it would be worth looking to streamlining the existing processes of data collection in the UK into a coherent form, to better assist policy makers in the UK to make multivariate assessments of 'learning gain'.