

Where is the knowledge? Visions of high quality undergraduate education in UK policy documents (0158)**Introduction**

Debates around ways of conceiving the quality of undergraduate education have largely focused on the changing focus of quality evaluations of teaching and learning in higher education (for example see Harvey 2005); how different stakeholders judge the quality of a undergraduate education (for example see Green 1994; Morely and Aynsley 2007), the impacts of quality processes on academic practices in higher education (for example see Morely 2003, Bamber et al 2009), as well as the impact of different systems of university rankings on higher education (for example see Harvey 2008).

In this paper we report on aspects of a project that, amongst other things, is seeking to understand the relations between the ways in which quality is positioned in national and international policy documents relating to higher education and students' accounts of what counts as a high quality university experience.

The research project

The *Pedagogic Quality and Inequality Project* is a three-year ESRC funded¹ research project, which focuses on the quality of teaching, learning and curricula in undergraduate sociology and allied subjects for students in universities that have different reputations for the quality of the undergraduate experience that they offer. The study aims to question the assumptions underlying these reputations through an in-depth study of the relations between what students bring to university, their experiences of university education and what they gain from these experiences.

In departments of sociology or allied subjects in four universities we are investigating what is taught, why and how; and how undergraduate students' and lecturers' experience and evaluate the curriculum and the teaching and learning environment. In conceptualising the project, we are drawing on the work of the sociologist Basil Bernstein who developed theories about how the distribution of knowledge in formal education settings reflects wider social hierarchies. These theories allow us to investigate whether, and the ways in which, factors such as class, gender, ethnicity, and age play out in curricula and teaching and learning processes in different university settings. Whilst, such analyses have been widely carried out in the field of school education, they are far less common in research in teaching and learning in higher education.

In examining policy debates around what counts as a high quality undergraduate education, we conceive of these as part of the 'distribution rules' of the 'pedagogic device' (Bernstein 1990, 2000). The pedagogic device conceptualises the process by which access to knowledge is stratified within society. It consists of three sets of rules which determine which kinds of knowledge are produced, who has access to these different kinds of

knowledge, and the different ways in which different groups in society are given access to particular kinds of knowledge. The distribution rules of the pedagogic device govern 'who may transmit what to whom, and under what conditions' (Bernstein, 1990, p.183). In examining policy documents relating to higher education from different interests groups, we are interested in examining how they contribute to the make-up of the distribution rules relating to higher education.

Methodological approach

In our analysis, we looked at policy documents from ten groups of organisations. These were policy documents from:

- the UK Government;
- the UK Parliament;
- Independent Reviews of Higher Education including The Dearing Report and Browne Review;
- Regulatory Bodies including the Quality Assurance Agency and Funding Agencies;
- University Groups including Universities UK, the Russell Group and Million Plus;
- Student Groups including the National Union of Students and the National Student Forum
- Groups representing academics including the University and College Union;
- Groups representing employers including the Confederation for British Industry;
- 'Think Tanks' including the Higher Education Policy Institute
- International organisations including the European Union and Organisation of Economic Co-operation and Development

In our analysis, we examined each of the policy documents and selected extracts that gave an account of what could be considered a 'high quality undergraduate education'. An initial selection was carried out by one researcher on the project and this was then checked and added to by another project member². These extracts were then imported into NVivo and codes assigned based on the particular aspect of a high quality undergraduate education that was identified.

In conducting the analysis, our intention was to develop a sense of how the notion of 'a high quality undergraduate education' is positioned in these documents and to examine the dominant views as well as the absences both within, and across the range of, the accounts analysed.

Provisional Outcomes

At the time of writing (June 2011) our analysis of these documents is still ongoing, therefore these comments should be seen as highly provisional at this stage. At the moment our analysis seems to be indicating that one of the clearest silences across the documents is that there is very little discussion of the role that knowledge and students' relations to knowledge play in a high quality undergraduate education. To some extent this may be because the documents we are analysing are focused on addressing all disciplinary knowledge practices, it is not possible for them to make general statements about this very wide range of knowledge practices. However, whilst this absence might be understandable, it may still have important consequence if it leads such debates to focus on what students are expected to be able to do with the knowledge that they gain rather than their relations to the intrinsic properties of the knowledge they study as part of their undergraduate

education (see Young 2008 and Moore 2009 for similar arguments on the absence of knowledge from debates around the sociology of education).

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