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Narratives of university life: a gendered and classed experience (0222)

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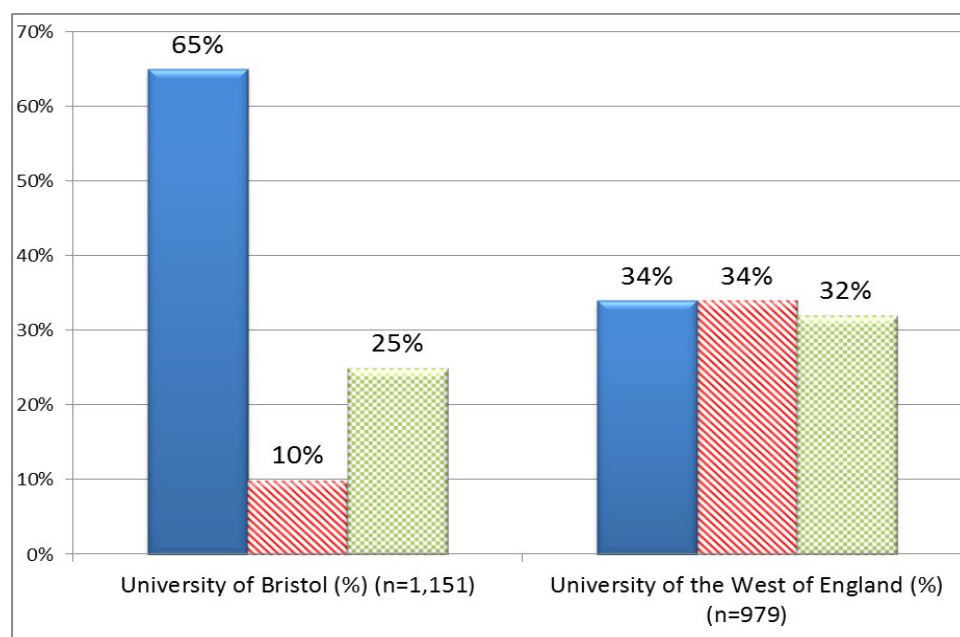
Research Domain: Student Experience

Paired Peers is three-year qualitative longitudinal project following a cohort of students drawn from two universities in the same English city, the University of Bristol (UoB) and the University of the West of England (UWE), through three years of their undergraduate degree (2010-2013). The overall aims of the project were to discover:

- ◆ How the experiences of students were differentiated by class
- ◆ What kind of capitals students brought into university with them (economic, social and cultural) and what capitals they acquired during their university years
- ◆ In this way, to begin to explore in what ways university might promote, or not promote, social mobility.

The students were drawn from eleven disciplines (representing the disciplines taught at both institutions): Biology; Drama; Economics/Accounting/Finance; Engineering; English; Geography; History; Law; Politics; Psychology and Sociology. They were matched by social class, so that, for example, we recruited four law students from each university, two we defined as working-class and two as middle-class. We used a multifactorial approach to defining class based on demographic information from an initial questionnaire to all students in the above disciplines during their first year induction meetings. We took into account the occupations of both parents, whether the parents had degrees, students' home postcode, type of school attended, how many of their friends were going to university, award of a bursary and self-defined class. Students were then classified as clearly working-class, clearly middle-class or intermediate/unclear. Chart 1 shows the class profile of all students at the two universities, who completed the initial questionnaires, using the class allocation scheme described above.

**Chart : Class profiles of students who completed initial questionnaire at UoB and UWE in 2010 (n=2,130)**



Why is there such a small proportion of working-class students at UoB? We would distinguish three important factors external to the university itself:

- ◆ middle-class parents' understandings of the hierarchical nature of HE
- ◆ The different input from private schools and state schools
- ◆ The students' own perceptions of 'a university that's right for me'.

We found that the pathways of students from wealthy and middle-class backgrounds tended to be smoother than those from poor and working-class backgrounds. Upper-middle class parents have the capital to send their children to private schools, pay for private tuition and send them to cultural-enriching activities. Middle-class parents also have social and cultural capital, enabling them to 'play the system' and aid their children in the application and selection processes, helping them to go to the 'best' universities. Working-class parents have none of these advantages, although working-class students spoke of encouragement and other support from their families.

Schools and colleges also make a difference. Private schools are geared to getting pupils into universities, especially elite ones. They often have connections with tutors, or with particular universities and university colleges. Students from private school told us of the meticulous preparation they received, with special classes, individual help with their UCAS forms and personal statements. It would be quite wrong to say that no state schools or colleges can emulate such processes: some do, but many students from state schools described their support as inadequate. Applications were left too late, no help was given with forms and early career guidance was lacking so that A-level subject choices made could rule out applications to particular courses:

*No-one even told me that if I wanted to do medicine I had to take the sciences and maths. They didn't prepare me at all. (Anna, working-class, UoB)*

From the initial respondents, we wished to identify a cohort of 80 students. We over-recruited slightly to allow for attrition, and in year one, we interviewed 90 students. Table highlights the social class and gender breakdown of our sample:

**Table : Social class and gender of the 90 participants in the Paired Peers project in Y1**

	Social Class		Gender		
	Middle Class	Working Class	Female	Male	Total
<b>UoB</b>	23	21	26	18	44
<b>UWE</b>	22	24	23	23	46
<b>Total</b>	45	45	49	41	90

In the final year we have a remaining sample of 70. Not all of these remain as pairs, but we retain enough to compare their trajectories once their final results are obtained. This recruitment strategy allowed us to compare the differing experiences and attitudes of students from different universities, different disciplines and differing social class backgrounds.

We worked intensively with students using a mix of methods. Students were interviewed in depth twice each year. We conducted focus groups on issues concerning masculinity and femininity. We solicited diaries and photos, constructed time sheets and maps of their usage of the city, and gathered a small amount of quantitative data (on satisfaction for example). At three end-of-year parties we chatted more informally with some of them. Although we lost ten along the way, the majority remained strongly committed to the project, and like Max, commented on its importance:

*In my view, the issues explored in this study are significant, making sense of the ways in which a student's social background has an impact on their experiences at university and, in turn, how the opportunities presented to them during study might shape their future prospects. The study encourages an evaluation of an imperfect and unbalanced education system. (Max, middle-class, UoB)*

This report is written at the end of the third year, when most of the students have taken their final exams and are facing outwards towards a highly competitive labour market in a period of recession. How has their university experience disposed and equipped them to face this challenge? In this brief report we trace the journeys of the students through the three years which have brought them to this point, highlighting some of the key findings, which are explored in depth and detail in the many papers and presentations emerging from the project (see <http://www.bristol.ac.uk/pairedpeers>).

## Getting In

*I didn't know if I should be reading or anything beforehand.... No-one in my family had really been to university before and I was like "I don't know what to do". It was really strange. But it's fine. You get used to it. (Abigail, working-class, UWE)*

*I was always going to go to university. It wasn't a question of not...both my parents went to university and everyone from my school went to university. (Elliot, middle-class, UoB)*

The initial interviews with our 90 students were unstructured. We asked them to tell us the story of how they came to be at Bristol or UWE and studying their particular discipline. On the basis of these narratives we identified five typical routes into university:

- ◆ **The taken for granted pathway:** going to university is seen as normal, everybody in family has a degree, siblings are already at university, most people at school are going. Many middle-class students fall into this category, particularly the upper middle classes.
- ◆ **The planning pathway:** going to university was a long-term goal and choices and actions were deliberately taken to achieve it. Aspirant and academically gifted young people from the working class may follow this route, as may highly motivated middle-class students.
- ◆ **The drifting pathway:** people could not really give an account of how they decided to go to university, they lacked aims and objectives, but ended up there. Drifters can come from all classes.
- ◆ **The rescue pathway:** the young person did not envisage going to university, was drifting, possibly falling into bad habits, but somebody took an interest and motivated them into applying. Rescues may involve less academic working-class and some demotivated middle-class students.
- ◆ **The derailment pathway:** the opposite of rescue. The young person starts off on a positive course towards university but something happens - illness, exam failure, family breakup - which disrupts their progress, resulting in dropout or setback. This can affect all class groupings; a number of middle-class students who had ended up at UWE fell into this category.
- ◆ **The disorganized route:** an extreme version of the three former routes. Because of their own or family actions - such as moving around the country, moving between schools, etc., - the trajectory is disrupted, even ruptured. The young person may start a degree, leave it, return to another course later in life, or enter into employment for a time before entering higher education (HE). This pattern is common with mature students, however, we did not include mature students in our sample to limit the number of possible variables impacting on our findings. Only two students from the Paired Peers project fit into this category, both of whom left early during their first year of study.

These trajectories are strongly linked to class, as are choice of university and the outcome of selection processes.

Nevertheless, we were surprised at how knowledgeable our participants were about universities. They were well aware of the 'pecking order' and many had extensively researched on websites, which now make information about higher education institutions (HEIs) much more accessible. However, not everybody wants to go to the 'top' universities. Students sought particular courses they liked the look of, visited Open Days, talked to friends and relatives and chose institutions where they thought they would feel comfortable:

*I was always looking at local because I am very family orientated so I do like being with my family and close to them in order to get home (Ruby, working-class, UWE)*

*I had an interview at King's College...I wasn't sure if I wanted to go there because I didn't think I'd quite fit in with it all, with their posh, bit weird, kind of ways. After a day there I didn't fancy it any more. The people put me off. (Craig, middle-class, UoB)*

It was particularly striking that getting into university is not just an individual but a family endeavour. Middle-class young people and their families draw on an array of capitals, while

those from the working-class must rely on their personal resources and determination, alongside emotional support from their families.

## Getting On

Studying at university was generally seen as ‘a massive step up’ from A Level learning by students from all social class backgrounds, in terms of large classes and cultures of independent study. The working-classes had to strive harder to get into university, but how did they cope when they arrived? We could think of these students as pioneers. Mostly the first in their family to go to university, leaving their schoolmates behind, they set out into uncharted territory. Like geographical pioneers, they appear on the whole to be resolute and resilient. But our data show they do face more constraints than their middle-class counterparts.

With less economic capital behind them, working-class students have to be more careful in managing their budgets. For many, this means that term-time working is a necessity. This in turn puts constraints on their ability to study and to participate in extra-curricular activities and socializing, as Megan told us:

*My boyfriend's just read so much and spent, just time doing what he needs and like bettering himself. And I couldn't help thinking every weekend I worked both days, maybe like 16 hours or something over the weekend, and all that time you're serving pizza to horrible, ungrateful people who are yelling at you... you're just thinking "oh I could be practising my violin" or "I could be reading" (Megan, working-class, UoB)*

Many working-class students were astonished by the prolific spending habits of the affluent young people they befriended, which they could not possibly match, as Samantha commented:

*They just spend money like it grows on trees ... go out and go shopping and buy more clothes and I'm like "but you have a wardrobe full of clothes, you don't need any more" (Samantha, working-class, UoB)*

For the wealthier students, money and running up debts did not seem to be a problem. They were also able to take lavish holidays in the summer, and if they got into real financial troubles they knew the family would be there to bail them out. Clearly this has an impact on study habits as well. One middle-class male student at UWE told us he spent £50 on photocopying for every assignment. Moreover, middle-class students possess an important cultural resource in their parents and relatives, whose own education means that they can help with study:

*I talk to mum quite a lot about stuff as well because she did an English degree and she loves poetry and things like that... she's usually read the stuff that we're reading so I just say "oh what did you think about this" (Lilly, middle-class UWE)*

Despite these constraints, the working-class students appeared by the second year to have settled in and adapted to university life and their material disadvantage did not appear to affect their results. Table shows that the grades they achieved in the second year were remarkably similar to those of the middle-class students (final year degree grades are not yet known).

**Table : grades achieved by middle-class and working-class participants in Y2 of the Paired Peers project**

Grade	Middle-Class (%) n=32	Working-Class (%) n=33	Total (%) n=65
1st	16	15	15

2:1	75	76	75
2:2	9	9	9

**Note:** Percentages have been rounded

A striking fact in a more detailed breakdown of the data is that none of the student participants who had attended a private school were achieving a first by the end of the second year. It may be that without the support offered by their schoolteachers they lacked the self-discipline to adapt to a less monitored teaching and learning environment. This was the view of Adrian, a middle-class student from UoB, whose parents had been upwardly mobile from a working-class background, and who had attended a state school. He described his encounter with two students from Eton:

*They just assumed that they were the cleverest and the best because they were told that they were the cleverest and the best. And it was quite funny working with them because they were both pretty lazy and pretty crap at what we were doing as well. But as far as I can tell they had been provided with the answers to everything for most of their lives, and I don't think it had changed at university either.*

We argue here that working-class students who have had to struggle independently to achieve a university place may have developed resilience, as reflected in these comments from Marcus, a working-class student at UoB:

*There is definitely a way of life associated with people who have been to boarding school, private school that is different. I have noticed that, not coming from that background. However, I actually feel they've gained no advantage – or very little advantage – from the experience and the price of their education. I constantly get reassured in the fact that I have similar grades to them, but when it comes to dealing with life shall we say, I don't know, I seem to get on better than them and it's them coming to me for advice.*

On the negative side, our evidence suggests that the resolve to work hard combined with the necessity to earn does restrict these students' ability to participate in extra-curricular activities, including volunteering or taking roles in the running of clubs, which are important in constructing a CV and distinguishing oneself in the competition for jobs. These activities are of increasing importance and are a crucial way of gaining new skills, making contacts and building social networks, and this cultural and social capital can subsequently be utilised in gaining access to careers. Where such activities were often a taken-for-granted continuation of life before university for many of the middle-class students in the sample, we found that working-class students tended to have a less structured social life, and would talk about spending more time in bars and clubs. The missed opportunities here may only be recognised in retrospect, as Adele explained in her final year, with some regret:

*I kind of wish I had joined maybe something sporty kind of thing. Like athletics. That's what I was good at when I was younger. Whereas here...our free time was utilised doing things less constructive, like drinking and just going out really. (Adele, working-class, UWE)*

Particularly in a period of recession, the mobilisation of cultural and social capitals, at which middle-class students seemed particularly adept, is a crucial part of what university life can offer and one which many working-class students appear to miss out on. Moreover, there may be an intersection of social class and institution in the mobilisation of capitals, with the elite University

of Bristol well aware of the value of such resources, as noted in *Epigram*, the UoB student newspaper:

*Networking and social skills may be a perfectly natural practice for UoB students but are one of the assets most valued by employers (Epigram, 19/3/12)*

In summary our data suggest that social class inequalities continue at university. It is not simply a matter of capacity to adjust to formal learning processes. Inequalities are experienced and maintained through differences in awareness of, and ability to participate in, the 'student experience'.

## Getting Out

*Jobs now are focused on internships and pre-experience and so you either can't afford to work in an unpaid internship, which most people can't, or you've had to work through uni and therefore haven't been able to get loads of extra activities and things under your belt, or you don't know the right people to get you those connections. (Martha, middle-class, UoB)*

There can be no doubt that networking and social skills are helpful in securing employment, but our participants are setting out into youth and graduate labour markets that are in crisis across Europe. Although graduates fare better than those who are less well-qualified, graduate unemployment is high. In this highly competitive situation, the gaining of placements and internships, paid or unpaid, has become a crucial factor. As recent publicity has shown, many sectors and industries (fashion, the media, publishing, Parliament) take advantage of this, acquiring creative and skilled young adults' labour for free. This obviously has serious consequences for class equality, as only those with parents wealthy enough to support them can afford to take them up. As Marcus told us:

*I'm not going to apply for an unpaid internship... I considered some of the ones in London but actually I'd spend all of the money I earned living for the 3 months. If I'm doing an internship I want something out of it, not just the experience. (Marcus, working-class, UoB)*

But whether paid or unpaid, internships and placements are hard to come by. Success depends very often on personal contacts, through family, relatives and friends. Here is where those from upper-middle-class backgrounds can benefit hugely, and are aware of this:

*[publishing] is kind of an area that you need to know people in it to progress, and I was like talking to my parents and I was like "I don't know anyone" and then we were like "we must know someone". And I've got a family friend whose daughter, our mums were in the antenatal group together, her dad though is like a CEO of a publishing house or something, so I was like "oh, I'll go and see him over the summer". (Harriet, middle-class, UWE)*

*Like my friend's going for medicine and she's doing work experience and the only way she can get it is through like a doctor who she knew, like her mum knows. It's a really competitive world and it's all about people you know. (Farrah, middle-class, UoB)*

In general, middle-class students seemed more aware of the need to participate in additional activities alongside studying for their future CV. Thus Joanna, a middle-class student at UWE



who had not much enjoyed her course, stated that CV building had been her major preoccupation:

*The reason I volunteer at St John's Ambulance now is because it will look good on my CV. And obviously I enjoy it, but the reason I started it was because it looks good on my CV and the guy I work with is brilliant for giving me references and things like that.... But yeah, that's what I've spent my 3 years doing, is making sure I've got a CV worth having when I leave because obviously there's a lot more competition for graduate jobs than there used to be and graduate is a sort of baseline that you then look at your CV to build upon.*

Table below shows the immediate destinations of our students and highlights the issue clearly. Internships have been secured mainly by the middle-classes and by male students.

**Table : Destinations of students in the Paired Peers project by university, class and gender**

	University		Social Class		Gender			Total	
	UOB (%) (n=34)	UWE (%) (n=25)	Middle Class (%) (n=33)	Working Class (%) (n=26)	Female (%) (n=35)	Male (%) (n=24)	(%) (n=59)		
Secured graduate job	15	0	9	8	3	17	9		
Secured PGCE place	12	8	9	12	17	0	10		
Secured other further study	12	4	12	4	9	8	9		
Secured summer internship/work experience	9	12	15	4	6	17	10		
No Destination secured	53	76	55	73	66	58	63		

**Note :** Percentages have been rounded

**Note 2:** Data in this table are based on students who completed a 6<sup>th</sup> interview during the period February-May 2013. 7 students are excluded from this table. They have another year of their degree due to placement years, being on a 4 year degree or having to re-take a year.

While more men than women have, before their final results, already secured graduate-level jobs, the class effect seems less significant here than the institutional one. At the start of this project we hypothesized that working-class students would find UoB more challenging and less congenial than UWE in terms of 'fit', but that they would come out of their experience better placed to secure employment success. It is early days, but it looks as if the hypothesis is proving correct. There is a cachet in having attended a 'top' university like Bristol. As of interview six, three quarters of the UWE students have no destination fixed, as opposed to just over half of UoB students. In terms of individual mobility then, it is concerning that, as the 2013 Milburn Report highlighted, the elite universities are not fulfilling their widening participation targets. Indeed, the recent Sutton Report (2013) showed that the proportion of working-class young people gaining access to Russell Group universities is actually falling. And yet, as our sample demonstrates, those working-class students that do make it may do just as well, if not better, than some of their privately educated counterparts, in part we suspect due to the generally greater resilience they have had to develop to actually get into university.

There are marked gender differences in progression routes, with women of both classes choosing to go on to further study in greater numbers than men (25 per cent of the women compared with



8 per cent of the men), with especially notable take-up of PGCEs. Significantly, over the three years we noticed female students' career aspirations channeling towards teaching, whatever the discipline they chose initially, often described in terms of a 'cooling out' of more ambitious career goals. Sally, a middle-class student at UoB, explained her decision as follows:

*I was going to be a hot-shot lawyer, and now I'm a failure and I'm going to be a teacher. I think originally I was more focused on like being rich and getting a really good job. But now....I think I'd rather... have a nicer life while I'm not working. I didn't really realise it before but I didn't notice how my parents work so much and then they come home and all they do is just work more, and I would hate that... So I think that's probably another reason why teaching just appealed to me so much, because you can just come home in the evening.*

Another striking finding was that many of those who had not yet found a destination were planning to return home in order to apply for jobs over the next year. This relates, obviously, to the recession, but also to the tortuous and lengthy processes of recruitment employed by many firms, notably in law, engineering and investment banking. As well as daunting psychometric tests, candidates have to fill in lengthy forms and undergo multiple interviews, assessment days and so forth. Again, these time-consuming and possibly expensive procedures may deter those from less wealthy backgrounds from trying to enter top professions. We question if they are really necessary. We also know that middle-class students can draw on parents' expertise and help in making such applications.

We have noted in our students over the three years a growing awareness of differences of class, wealth and privilege. We would not dispute that to some extent being involved in this project has heightened their sensitivity to these topics. Yet we feel that working-class students who came to university not particularly thinking of themselves as disadvantaged have had their eyes opened to inequalities by observing (and sometimes disapproving of) the more lavish lifestyles of the upper-middle class students, while the more advantaged were somewhat uneasily aware of their privileges, while at the same time subtly downplaying them. Thus a student who wanted to shift to medicine denied that it would help having parents who were doctors (even though the work experience she obtained through family contacts helped her to gain a place). Others responded by acknowledging their good fortune, but spoke of wanting to 'give something back' to society, perhaps through charity or voluntary work. This was of particular concern amongst the working-class students who felt very lucky to have made it, and were keen to help others succeed in following them rather than closing the door behind them, however this is not always easy in contemporary British society as Anna pointed out:

*I want to feel like what I do helps someone else and isn't just for my own gain, which is difficult because the workforce is set up to encourage you to go for your own interests and gain. (Anna, working-class, UoB)*

## **Political and Policy Issues**

### *Current conundrums*

Currently there is a political ferment around universities. Cuts in funding have led to loss of staff and workload pressures on those that remain. The continuing intrusion of market values into a sector originally committed to collegialism has led to heightened competition between different 'mission groups', such as the Russell Group, the University Alliance, the Millennium Group and Million Plus. The Russell Group, of which UoB is a member, tends to privilege research over teaching, while at the same time seeking to recruit the very best students (with AAA scores). At the same time, marketisation has promoted the institution of a variable fees regime which

reconstructs students as 'customers' and 'consumers'. Interestingly, UoB students were initially more critical than their UWE counterparts of the teaching provision, which middle-class UoB students contrasted unfavourably with the high levels of contact and personal interaction which characterised their public and private schools.

We asked our student participants what they thought of the introduction of the new higher fees (£9k per annum for students commencing in 2012/2013), whether this represented value for money and whether it would have deterred them from attending university. The responses were intriguing. Very few students thought that they were getting value for money. These newly minted 'consumers' had calculated the cost of each lecture and seminar, and were none too pleased if one was cancelled. They did not think they were getting enough 'bang for their bucks' and yet the majority of them still stated that they would have attended university whatever the (unmerited) cost, since without a university education their life chances would be limited. As the student in the quote which opened this report stated 'this is a degree generation'. However, there were some class effects here: working-class students often stated that they thought their school friends would definitely have been put off by the higher fees, and that they themselves might have chosen different, more vocational subjects if they had been faced with over £27k of debt: business studies rather than sociology, law rather than history. Initial analysis of current applications suggest this is indeed the case.

Proponents of the new fees regime often minimize the effects of the debt students accrue by pointing out that the degree is 'free at the point of consumption' and that students will only have to repay the debt when their incomes reach a certain level. However, we should point out that the fees are not the only debt involved: there is also the opportunity cost of *not* earning money for three years, as well as three years' living costs to think about, and these can be demanding, especially in relation to accommodation and the desire to participate in the lively student lifestyle. We found that many of our working-class students were better than their middle-class counterparts at managing their constrained budgets, but nonetheless some reported that they and their parents had to take out extra loans to cope, such as Zoe and Jack:

*I don't know what families they think come here, but maintenance grant is 3 grand, roundabout, and the cheapest accommodation here is 4 grand. And so I'm already a grand down and that's without having to buy myself food, or anything else. (Jack, working-class, UWE)*

*My parents took out their own loans just to be able to give me like set-up costs to come here, like deposits for things, like internet, all these hidden costs, hundreds and hundreds of pounds, on top of their deficit between my university accommodation and my loan, which is about a grand. (Zoe, working-class, UoB)*

Although very concerned about their current financial state, we were surprised to find that few of our participants were hugely worried about the debt they had accumulated through their loans. Some were vague about how much debt they had accrued. It did not seem to weigh upon them; one might put that down to the optimism of youth, or simply that the day of reckoning was too far off. One student, however, whose sister was currently paying off her loan, *was* aware of the potential impact:

*My sister, she graduated 2 years ago and, when was it, it was like 2011, they were sending her letters saying "could you tell us exactly what job you're doing now and how much you're getting paid" and then they were giving calculations "if you're getting paid this amount we're going to take this amount every.....blah, blah, blah,*

*your salary every month” and it was just scary looking at it. (Sariah, working-class, UWE)*

There can be no doubt that universities will be pressured by students to direct more resources into teaching. The major demand of the students was for more personal contact with and guidance from individual staff members:

*If I was paying £27,000 I would expect it to be a more personal experience. I wouldn't pay £27,000 for mass teaching out of a textbook, turning up to labs every day (Marcus, engineering, UoB).*

We asked our students where, in a time of limited resources, universities should concentrate their spending. The results are shown below.

**Table : Students' views about which resources universities should prioritise**

Resource	University	Social Class		Total		
		UoB (%) n=34	UWE (%) n=19	Middle Class (%) n=27	Working Class (%) n=26	Total (%) n=53
More teaching staff		35	42	52	23	38
More books and library resources		41	32	22	54	38
More computer provision		9	16	11	12	11
Smarter classrooms/labs		9	5	7	8	8
Improved student union and leisure facilities		6	0	4	4	4

**Note:** Percentages have been rounded

These results are in stark contrast to the views of university managements who argue that students will be attracted by new buildings, better IT provision and consumer services such as coffee bars and smart student unions. We suggest that universities need to give more attention to listening to student voices, rather than assuming they know what these young adults want. As one student emphasized, what mattered to her was:

*More teaching staff. They're the people that make your experience worthwhile. I think the smarter classroom thing...people think that technology makes the learning experience better. I mean if you sit at a grubby desk and do work it's the same thing as a nice posh expensive desk, it doesn't actually make us work any harder which is what we're here to do (Anna, working-class, UoB)*

#### *Improving the 'student experience'*

One concern that characterised students across the whole sample was the difficulty they experienced in making the transition from the structured and monitored learning environment of

school or college to the university culture of self-directed independent learning. The school/college experience was persistently described as ‘spoon-feeding’. While most students eventually adapted and came to value independent learning, the experience indubitably is responsible for student dropout in the first year. To counter that and help students adapt more quickly we suggest:

- ◆ Schools and colleges could help by moving students from more teacher-structured to more student-structured study, for example, by developing effective library search skills; getting students to do essay plans and providing formative feedback; moving beyond provision of model answers and notes, by developing students’ own skills in producing a successful answer.
- ◆ Universities could help by explanation of rationale for self-directed learning, providing independent study skills classes, offering more formative feedback opportunities, mentoring, and providing timetabled academic tutorials.
- ◆ A ‘buddying system’ could support new students, similar to the university outreach programmes, whereby 2<sup>nd</sup> year students ‘mentor’ a first year through the challenges they face.

As this report has shown, our participants were a serious bunch. While they enjoyed the lighter side of student life, success in their courses and how that would help them in their future life was their major concern. Another common complaint was the limited nature of coverage at graduate recruitment fairs, which were seen to be geared to the corporate sector, especially finance, law and engineering. Many students looking for careers in the voluntary and public sector felt more guidance and information about opportunities in these areas was needed. When students are paying so much to acquire a degree, they will want more help in converting it into career openings. We applaud the schemes being set up, as at UWE, to help poorer and less well-connected students to gain internships in a range of sectors, though we also learned that these opportunities were quickly seized by middle-class students as well as those at whom they were targeted. Nevertheless, there need to be many more such schemes.

Another issue which this study highlighted for us was the ways in which UWE and UoB inhabit separate worlds. This may arise from the perceived social gulf between students at the two universities, with UoB students perceived as ‘posh’, ‘snobby’, rich and privileged. Although individual friendships may spring up where students live in joint housing schemes, on the whole students at the two universities remain segregated. The classed basis to this separation was evident in apocryphal tales, such as the UWE/UoB Varsity boat race, where some UoB students are reported to wave wads of cash at the UWE team and their supporters to remind them of their place. This segregation is true of the staff as much as the students, and we suggest that much better links would be beneficial, especially in terms of shared resources in times of austerity. Working together might also contribute to challenging the stereotyping and mutual suspicion between the two student bodies.

### **Conclusion: *Pathways to prosperity?***

*It's a signal for employers that we got a degree at Bristol. That really annoys me, I didn't come here for a signal, I came here for something more. (Sean, working-class, UoB)*

The question we asked at the outset was does class make a difference to how students experience their university years. This report has highlighted some of the ways in which it does: sense of ‘fit’, differing friendship groups, economic constraints on working-class students, necessity for them to take up jobs, differences in capacity to participate in extra-curricular activities, and,

perhaps most crucially, differential access to internships and placements. However, the larger question is whether universities foster social mobility?

Our answer must be provisional. We hope to get follow-up funding to see what happens to our student cohort over the next few years, but at the moment we can only hazard a guess at long-term outcomes. Our initial hypothesis was that working-class students would feel more comfortable and settle in more easily at UWE, the more diverse institution, but that working-class students would eventually benefit from getting a degree from UoB, as highlighted in the comment above from Sean. Our findings suggest that our hypothesis will be correct; students at UoB appear more likely to get jobs quickly and have already procured useful internships. We see some of our working-class UoB students heading to successful professional careers. Thus we can see that university experience does have benefits for individual advancement and social mobility, as expressed by Marcus, a working-class UoB student:

*I do aspire to live a higher class life than my parents did, I just see it as a natural progression, and I think Bristol has been a huge stepping stone in achieving that. It is a really good opportunity for social mobility from the cultural experiences you can gain.*

Critics of the concept argue that this does nothing to alter the class structure as a whole with its entrenched inequalities, and this is on the face of it true. However, we suggest that it is a little more complex than this. There is more to university education than getting a qualification, as again indicated in Sean's comment earlier. Education has an intrinsic value that is lost in the employability agenda and in shift to viewing students as consumers or customers. Many of the students spoke of the other advantages they had gained: broadened experience, contacts with people from other class, ethnic and national backgrounds, increased maturity and social standing. Above all, the experience *opens the mind*. As Sally commented:

*University is definitely a life-changing experience (Sally, middle-class, UoB)*

Many of our students spoke of 'wanting to give something back to the community', especially those working-class students aware of the sacrifices made by their parents to help them on their way. We believe that these young people will go into the world with more open views than some of the older generations and more ready to confront injustices. In this, we argue, lies some hope for a fairer future.