INSTITUTIONAL VARIATIONS IN BRITISH STUDENTS' APPROACHES TO LEARNING AND EXPERIENCES OF TEACHING

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ABSTRACT

This article examines differences in reported approaches to studying and course perceptions of students in British universities and polytechnics. Hypotheses about these differences derived from the functions and characteristics of the two sets of institutions are compared with data from a questionnaire survey of 1903 university students and 305 polytechnic students. The results, adjusted for subject area differences, indicate that contrary to expectation the university group are less likely than the polytechnic group to use deep approaches to studying. The two groups report similar patterns of study organisation. The university students experience somewhat poorer teaching. The polytechnic students are more interested in gaining qualifications for employment and perceive their courses to be clearly to this end. The results are considered in relation to further research into student learning patterns and implications for the binary system of higher education.

Introduction

In the 1960s the British government adopted a policy for higher education which resulted in a separation of functions between the universities and other tertiary institutions offering courses at an advanced level. A primary aim of this binary policy was to prevent an expanding system of higher education from domination by the universities, a consequence which would have been inevitable had the recommendation of the Robbins Committee that the university system be greatly enlarged been followed. Instead, the government decided to encourage the development of vocationally-orientated higher education programmes relat-
ed to national and local demands for trained professionals and responsive to changing labour demands. The expansion of non-university higher education was intended to keep a large part of the system under firmer administrative control than was then thought possible in the more autonomous universities.

The most important way in which the binary policy was put into effect was by creating thirty new institutions in England and Wales called polytechnics. In fact none of these was a new foundation; all were amalgams of previously-existing colleges of art, commerce, technology, and - later - education. Although much has been written about the supposed successes and failures of the binary policy (q.v. Pratt and Burgess, 1974; Scott, 1983), hardly anything has been said about students' experiences of teaching and assessment in the polytechnics, and nothing at all about differences in approaches to studying in universities and polytechnics that might be expected to arise from the structural and ideological features of the two groups of institutions. The particular concern of this article is with how students in universities and polytechnics study and how they perceive their courses. It is of interest to inquire whether the expectations generated by the policy for separate (but nominally equal) development of polytechnics and universities are in accordance with students' experiences. It is equally important to ask how effective the two parts of the higher education system are in terms of student learning, and to consider the implications of differences and similarities between the two sectors for future policy.

**Functions and Character of the Universities and Polytechnics**

British universities, despite their functions of professional preparation in certain fields such as medicine and engineering, are fundamentally concerned with the advancement and transmission of knowledge within academic disciplines. Staff are appointed and promoted for their understanding and knowledge of the subject-matter and techniques of a discipline, and they remain on the whole protected by the government of universities through the concepts of academic freedom and tenure. Their research is not normally required to be obviously “relevant” to established institutions. The universities are important centres of undergraduate teaching as well as of research and scholarship. The student population is, compared with many other countries, very highly selected on the basis of previous achievement. Although there have been several periods of innovation in course structures in the history of the universities, most English and Welsh universities have for many years offered as their main undergraduate programmes three year courses confined to one or two discipline areas.

In contrast, the polytechnics emphasise vocational preparation in their courses. Their students see themselves to be studying in a way which is “relevant to the needs of society” rather than “studying for its own sake” (Donaldson,