

The Paired Peers Project: Year 2

**Not what I expected:**  
from school to university learning  
environments

Harriet Bradley, University of Bristol  
Ann-Marie Bathmaker, UWE Bristol

# Overview

- Introduction to the Paired Peers project
- The transition to university
- UWE/UoB differences
- Disciplinary differences
- The impact of class
- Is university value for money?
- Conclusions

# The research project

## AIMS

- To compare the experiences of students from different backgrounds, in 2 different universities, in a range of different subjects
- To do this utilising a matched pairs method
- To follow a cohort of pairs over their 3 years of study
- To explore what factors help students to academic success
- To investigate the impact of different forms of capital: economic, social, cultural, virtual, embodied etc
- To experiment with a range of methods to explore experiences, behaviours and attitudes

# Methods: the sample

- Pairing structure: subject studied, university, pairs matched by class –  
eg 8 law students: 4 from each uni, with 2 w/c, 2 m/c at each university
- Overall target 80 but initial over-recruitment (90)
- From subjects taught at both universities:  
biology, drama, economics & accountancy, engineering,  
English, geography, history, law, politics, psychology, sociology.
- Recruited during 1st week induction sessions in Year 1 of UG study

# METHODS Year 1

- **1st interview:** an unstructured account of how the students came to be at UoB or UWE.  
*90 completed*
- **2nd Interview:** semi – structured: how students have settled into student life and experienced their first year.  
*76 completed, including 30 pairs*
- Photos of their Christmas holidays
- ‘A day in the life’: short diary accounts

# METHODS Year 2

- **3<sup>rd</sup> Interview** – A typical week - Talking through activities and constructing a timetable for the past week  
*73 completed*
- **4th Interview-** Semi-structured, focusing on a)  
course experience and  
b) looking forward to the transition to work  
*63 completed*

# The transition to a university teaching and learning environment

Students' perceptions:

- An initial shock for many
- Less teaching contact, more independent study
- Spoon-feeding at school?
- Impersonal nature of staff/student relations
- Self-directed study with little or no on-going formative feedback
- Need for self-discipline
- Small fish in big pond...
- 'Massive, massive step' from 1<sup>st</sup> to 2<sup>nd</sup> year

## The university teaching and learning environment: the national context

- Despite tripling of fees from 2005 no real rise in contact hours –  
2005-2011 from 13.7 to 13.9 (HEPI survey)
- **Highest** taught hours in med, vet, engineering
- **Lowest** taught hours in law, classics, history
- **Lowest** total hours in business, mass comms



# The initial shock

*I think it's quite big because at school I was spoon-fed quite a bit. Do you know, you had to like learn, you just learnt from a text book. Yeah I think you have to be more independent in uni and motivate yourself and I find that quite difficult sometimes.*

(UWE m/c male)

# Impersonal nature of staff/student relations

*In school I liked the support, like the close contact with teachers. And here at the university there's loads of lecturers and there are so many students they don't know who you are. And I kind of find that relationship between the lecturer and the student a bit distant – and that's kind of hard to keep me motivated. Because in school they'd be like “well done, you're really good” and that would kind of motivate you to do more  
(UWE m/c male)*

# Self-directed study, no on-going formative feedback

*It felt like there was a huge difference. 'A' levels now seem like a walk in the park. ..When you get into it and you start having essays where, you know, no-one goes over an essay plan with you and nobody helps you or looks over your work for you, it's just like research it yourself and put loads of work in, it's just something you've never done before.*

*(UoB w/c)*

# Independent, self-directed study

- *A massive step up, like at school and at college you're sort of guided in what you learn and then also in how to structure work as well, which is one thing that I really struggle with. (UoB m/c f)*
- *You'd always got guidance at school and college, it was always like "do this, do that, do that". At university you're sort of thrown in at the deep end, it's like "OK I've just got to do it all myself" and find my own books and do everything else, like that's the big difference I think – well it is for me anyway (UWE w/c m)*

# UWE/UoB differences: the UoB experience

- Some complaints about difficult lectures, in a system where lecturers talk about their own research areas
- Good attendance at seminars
- Some guidance, eg on 'how to read'
- Close monitoring  
*If you miss lectures, if you miss three lectures in a row they're like "where are you", because there's only 19 of us and they know.'* (UoB w/c f)

# UoB: going to lectures

*The lectures are just so pointless – I cannot stress enough how pointless and irrelevant they can be... I feel really guilty if I don't go, especially when you're paying so much and you get so few hours anyway, so I always try and go. But, it's just so difficult to motivate yourself when you know that there's no point....but it's good to keep yourself in that kind of academic mindset and it's good to like hear arguments and things sometimes. But when sometimes it's just literally they're babbling to themselves and you can't understand, or they're just outlining what's happened in the text and you think "well I could have read that on Wikipedia".*

**(UoB f m/c)**

# UoB: academic reading

*It was quite hard at the beginning . Some of them are really, really like complicated and I found it really hard, like I'd be reading the whole journal. But then they said just like skim them a bit more, just read the abstracts and then if they're really relevant then read the introduction and the discussion and don't like really bother with the methods because that's not really what they want to know about. They want to know about the context of it and like the implications of it... So I have started like reading them a lot more, and it has become a bit easier.... (UoB m m/c)*

# UWE/UoB differences: the UWE experience

- Variability of lectures
- Cancellation of modules because of recent staff cuts
- Poor attendance at seminars
- Some subjects appear to have given them up, turning to group work, labs –or student-led assessed sessions
- More individual help and one-to-one feedback (in some departments at least)



# UWE: experience of seminars

- UWE w/c f reported only 3 turn up out of 15 or 20 (at 9 on Fridays). One person has only turned up once.
- *Whenever there's deadlines there's hardly anyone there.'*(UWE m/c f)
- *The lectures are really good I think, but the seminars – they're OK, like I personally try my hardest to turn up to things but when people don't turn up to them it just makes it a bit awkward because you've only got a couple of people there and it's really hard to get a conversation going .* (UWE w/c)

## UWE: Helpful post-assessment formative feedback

*After you've done your coursework you have to go to the tutor and spend sort of like 10 minutes sort of discussing your coursework piece afterwards and what you did right and what you did wrong. And they are good in that respect, they do say that if you need any help or if you don't understand anything in your work or whatever and yeah it's good the feedback, yeah. (UWE w/c)*

## Disciplinary differences: different subjects, different expectations, different issues

- **Psychology UoB– lecture/seminar structure:**

*We have four weeks of lectures then two weeks of seminars, so it would be easier if we had the seminars along with the lectures rather than the blocks.*

- **Drama UoB– lecture/seminar structure:**

*We have sort of lecture seminars, so we tend to have like an hour and then straight afterwards we have the seminar, which can be a bit annoying because it's not really sunk in what you've been discussing in the lecture, and although you've done the reading for it, you've not really had time to process like the links between what you've learnt in the lecture and then what you've read.*

## Different subjects... different issues (cont)

- **English – assessment practices:**

*It's so subjective who marks it. Like some people like your writing styles, some people like your ideas, other people don't, and they tend to be really....I don't think anyone that I know really has consistent marks because it completely depends who is marking their work.*

- **Engineering – two-hour lectures**

- Huge lectures and lack of personal contacts

**Joint degrees – co-ordination:**

*I think for joint honours they could do a lot better to coordinate deadlines. There's no reason why the economics couldn't have coordinated it a little bit differently at the end of January, because it felt horrible.*

# Class matters...

- In the 'cultural' and financial support parents are able to offer

# Parental support: middle class 'cultural' resources

*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 and I don't really like poetry. That's the side of my course that I don't enjoy so much But she's usually read the stuff that we're reading so I just say oh what did you think about this?*  
(UWE m/c f)

# Parental support: working-class self-sufficiency

- In contrast to middle class example (previous slide) w/c young woman reports that her mum and brother know nothing of the topics but she gets them to read essays through for sense
- *No, it wasn't that hard in the beginning to break the ice. And again in A level I did all my homework on my own, it's not like my parents ever helped me because they didn't really understand it.*  
(UoB w/c f)
- *At my college at least we worked quite independently anyway, it wasn't like we were spoon-fed* (UoB w/c f)

# Middle-class financial resources

- UWE m/c boy spends £50 per assignment on photocopying materials in library.



# Is university value for money?

- Many students critical of what they receive, would expect more for £27k
- However, the majority say they expect they would still come because a degree is essential
- Choice of degree might be affected, however
- Some may embrace cheaper options

‘when a lecture was cancelled we’d just be like “that’s £60 out the window”’ (UoB, Drama)

- *University fees really baffle me, they really do. Because we don’t know where the money’s going a lot of the time. I mean for our course for example, we’re all paying 3 grand a year but we have like really limited books, for our course we’ve got I think two shelves in the library.*
- *‘I don’t think you’re necessarily paying for your teaching. You obviously pay some of it – I suppose the facilities as well, your money goes into that, but I think a lot of your money goes towards the research’*
- *If it came to 9 grand I probably would have said to my parents “I’m not going to uni because that’s ridiculous.” Unless you show more for it, you can’t triple the price. But tripling...like it’s just mental.*

# Worth £9000 a year?

*'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. If there was a bit more monitoring on you, you had a mentor in industry that could give you the relevance, quite happily yes. The career I want to go into you have to do a 4 year, so that's £36,000, I don't think the £36,000 is worth 4 years of textbook knowledge. At the end of the day, the people teaching you give an insight but the material they're teaching from each year probably only costs £600, so you are just paying for their time and insight, which isn't always any different to the textbooks.'*

# What do students want? - Resources most wanted by students

Resource	Breakdown by university		Breakdown by social class		Total
	UOB	UWE	Middle Class	Working Class	Total
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%
Total Count	N = 34	N = 19	N = 27	N = 26	N = 53

% of students who rated the following resources as 'most important', split by university and social class

# Here to learn

- *I'd rather they put money into helping people learn rather than making it look pretty, you know, I don't think that's really important. (UWE f m/c)*
- *It should go towards making your degree better rather than making your social life better. (UWE f w/c)*
- *More teaching staff ...the library's quite big but it needs to be far bigger. I mean everyone goes on about how the student experience is so important, but for me my degree is far more important than the hockey team or the lacrosse team (UWE m w/c)*

# Would students choose otherwise?

Comments from **working-class** students:

- *'Some of the people that graduated last year, they're working in Tescos, one of them is an estate agent. And if I'd spent 40 grand learning that subject, to then become an estate agent, I'd be furious, absolutely furious.'* (UoB f w/c)
- One w/c f reports on a friend who wants to be an accountant, who chose to do an apprenticeship not a degree

Comment from **middle-class** student:

*'...I think I would have always wanted to come to university regardless of price, and luckily I'm in a position where I probably could either way, but I do think it would make me think harder about if it was definitely the degree I wanted to be doing, and I'd think about that, yeah, if it was more expensive.'* (UoB f m/c)

# ‘We have to do it’

- *My brothers are not as good academically as me by a long way, but there's no way that it's going to stop them going to university. I hasten to add that we are not a family for whom £3000, let alone £9000, is a pittance, that is a lot of money, but it doesn't come into the...there is no value judgement of that amount of money, it's just how much we have to pay “OK, well we have to do it”. (UWE m m/c)*

# Conclusions

- Majority of students manage the transition, certainly by second-year, & come to value independent study
- There are some casualties – dropouts, transfers
- Many learn to appreciate the value of independent learning
- Schools could ...  
help by preparing students, eg setting them library search tasks, getting them to do essay plans, less spoon-feeding
- Universities could ...  
help by explanation of rationale, instruction on independent learning, mentoring, getting more involved with students, encouraging them