Wot u @ uni 4?

Brendan Larvor and John Lippitt

Abstract

In a project funded by the Subject Centre,[1] we used focus groups to explore students' answers to six questions, including their reasons for going to university and their views of the purpose of higher education. Particular surprises were the invisibility of research to students and the depth of disagreement about the value of seminars. But most significant was the consequence of the dramatic decline in contact hours on arrival at university. Students found it difficult to form supportive study relationships. They also seem unclear about the distinc tion between collaboration and collusion. We end, therefore, by suggesting that learning and teaching practice needs to be illuminated by reflections on critical friendship.

Background and Rationale

'My dear Agathon...I only wish that wisdom were the kind of thing that flowed...from the vessel that was full to the one that was empty.' – Plato, Symposium

Staffroom anecdote suggests a mismatch between university staff and students about the purpose and value of higher education. Such a mismatch, if it exists, will hamper teaching, learning and assessment. Activities and criteria that are intelligible given the background assumptions of staff may make no sense to students, if students have a different conception of the whole purpose of going to university. For example: do students who think of learning as fact-gathering understand the point of seminars or workshops that are aimed at developing skills and intellectual virtues? Does anyone explain this to them? It is difficult to engage wholeheartedly with an activity that seems arbitrary or ungrounded. Amisunderstanding about the purpose of higher education could account for the behaviour of students who seem to despise or abandon their academic work (even if they do not formally withdraw from university).

This mini-project investigated the understanding of the purpose and practice of higher education among undergraduate students in philosophy.

Method

We put six questions to focus groups made up of philosophy undergraduate students:

1. Why did you come to university?
2. What do you think is the purpose of a university?
3. What do you think is the purpose of seminars?[2]
4. Is your answer to either of these questions (purpose of a university; purpose of seminars) different now from the answer you would have given before you applied to university?

5. Is there anything that nobody told you before you came to university that you wish they had? If so, what?
6. How do university essays differ from any essays you have written previously?

Each focus group lasted approximately one hour. The focus groups took place at four universities. Two of these are in the Russell Group and two are post-1992 universities (one former polytechnic and one former college of higher education). Each group of eight students included representatives of all three undergraduate years, and divided (so far as possible) evenly between students with and without graduate kin. We did not inform participants of the purpose of the research before the session; we answered their questions at the end. We made audio recordings of the focus groups but not the subsequent questionperiods. Before we conducted the four focus groups, we ran a pilot using a different group of students at the first of the four institutions, to order trial the questions. Using two groups at one institution helped us to allow for the effects of particular personalities and biographies within groups, as we were able to compare the replies of two groups drawn from the same student body. Nevertheless, we are conscious that four groups of eight students constitute a narrow empirical base. Moreover, there is likely to be a significant selection effect, because the participants responded to our advertisement, and are thus untypical of their cohorts. However, our principal results emerged from clear consensus, were present in all four groups, and conform to the results of large-scale statistical studies such as Longden and Yorke (2007).

Results

The students at all four institutions gave similarly intelligent, thoughtful and articulate answers. The only remarkable difference in the content of their answers was that the students at the former college of HE were more aware of universities as instruments of social and economic policy. They observed that a university can animate the economy and gentrify the culture of an otherwise quiet small town.

From the answers to each of the six questions, we have extracted themes or features that either emerged as common trends or seemed noteworthy on other grounds.

1.Why did you come to university?

It was widely observed that for many students, university is simply the default next stop after secondary school or sixth-form college. For some it is an attractive—if expensive—alternative to work, and allows them to defer life-decisions.[3]

However, more detailed answers to this question articulated an even mix of vocational and educational goals. On the vocational side, the chief aim was a higher salary, though some students had particular professions in view, such as school-teaching, apparently without regard to income. The educational goals included specialising in a chosen subject; meeting a diverse population; the development of social skills, especially tolerance; the development of new tastes; progression to independent life ('flying the nest'); gaining self-confidence and selfunderstanding; and finding like-minded souls.

There was also a fairly even split between expressions of gratitude for the opportunity to attend university and expressions of entitlement to services paid for in fees. (The fact that

higher education is still massively subsidised by the tax-payer does not seem to loom large in the undergraduate mind: some students seemed to believe that their tuition fees covered the entire cost of their education.) We note for future studies the question of whether a grid made up from these two axes (vocational/educational, gratitude/entitlement) would show a pattern.

2.What do you think is the purpose of a university?

The students' answers to this question were overwhelmingly repeats of their answers to question one. That is to say, they almost unanimously answered the question in terms of their own interests and goals. The thought that universities have purposes other than undergraduate education, when it did arise, almost invariably came from mature students or students who had taken non-traditional routes into university. By asking about the purpose of a university, the wording of the question may have obscured the possibility that universities have multiple purposes.

One student said that university was for education in those matters where this cannot easily be done independently. This suggested to us—especially in the light of some of the responses to questions three and five—that Newman's focus on a university as a physical community of learners ('the assemblage of strangers from all parts in one spot'[4]) still has contemporary relevance, notwithstanding developments in distance-learning and e-learning.

Students took a long time to remember that universities do research. Interestingly, this effect was equally marked at all four institutions. It would seem that the research activity of universities does not make much impression on the undergraduates, even at Russell Group institutions. However, once research came up, some students spoke feelingly about classes left in the hands of post-graduate students or taught in a perfunctory fashion by tutors who clearly regard teaching as something they have to do in order to do research. On the whole, students did not regard the research activity of their tutors as a benefit to themselves, except for some recognition that that teaching is livelier when tutors teach their research-topics. The students at the former HE college knew that they were at a 'teaching-focused' institution. However, their understanding of the relation between teaching and research was indistinguishable from that of the students at Russell Group institutions.

Students reported that our question two is not much asked either at home, school or college. Such discussion as they could recall was entirely in terms of their own decisions to attend university. In other words, their previous discussions of question one did not lead to any debate about question two.

3.What do you think is the purpose of seminars?

Students tended to focus first on the role of seminars in mastering course content: seminars are an opportunity to check for gaps and misunderstandings, to develop an independent view of the material and for students with more discursive learning styles to engage with the material. Subsequently, they identified seminars as the occasion to develop team-working, social skills, self-awareness and self-confidence. Students divided more sharply over the value of seminars than over any other issue. Some students were unwilling to see any value in listening to other non-experts, and regarded time spent in discussion with their peers as time wasted. Others regarded seminars as more important than lectures. Indeed, some students identified seminars as the reason for attending a campus university rather than distance learning or e-learning.

At one institution, the final year teaching is entirely by seminars, with no lectures. While the students recognised the value of seminars, one remarked that, 'The odd lecture wouldn't go amiss. They could throw us a bone every once in a while.'

4. Is your answer to either of these questions (purpose of a university; purpose of seminars) different now from the answer you would have given before you applied to university?

Students' experience of higher education had little effect on their understanding of the purpose of a university. As we saw under question two, they had not reflected much beyond their personal reasons for going to university.

However, students expressed some dissatisfaction with universities' focus on employability. The concern here seemed to be that such a focus, while understandable, was excessively instrumental. (As one student put it, 'I just want to learn.') Surprisingly, in two groups, students seemed to have the impression that their university was unusual in focusing on employability, unaware that most if not all institutions have embraced this agenda. Further dissatisfaction targeted the idea of universities as businesses: some students insisted that universities should be more concerned with social goods than they are.

Students' positive answers all focused on seminars. Many of them had come to value seminars increasingly over the course of their studies, while the perceived value of lectures had declined. Some students reported that before they attended university, they found the prospect of contributing to seminars daunting. In the event, the experience of seminars was much less stressful than they expected and they were surprised how easy it is to contribute. (Here, the selection effect may have played a role. By participating in our focus groups, these students had in effect volunteered for an extra seminar, unconnected to their formal assessments.)

5. Is there anything that nobody told you before you came to university that you wish they had? If so, what?

All four groups reported that the lack of contact time comes as a shock. Full-time undergraduate philosophy students typically have about eight hours of classroom time per week, sometimes less. This requires an abrupt change in study habits from school or college, and makes strenuous demands on the time-management capacities of students who had previously relied heavily upon teachers to programme their activities. This is particularly true on modules where all the assessment comes at the end. Most of the students had been warned about this in advance but had not developed the habits and discipline necessary to heed such warnings.

The lack of contact time had a less obvious consequence. Because they spend so little time together in the classroom, humanities students find it difficult to bond and form supportive study relationships (most of the students in these groups were taking philosophy with other humanities subjects). Some students were surprised by the lack of mutual support and had arrived at university expecting to participate in student reading-groups. Some students were lonely, but even those who formed social networks were often isolated in their studies, because they lived with or socialised with students on other courses. Students reported that Virtual Learning Environments help, but not decisively. It seems that VLEs can facilitate existing supportive study relationships, but not engender them.

Some students were disappointed by the low levels of commitment to study among other students. The committed students felt (sometimes resentfully) that the uncommitted mass of students come to university because it is 'what you do next' and because they do not know what else to do. This feature was common to all four institutions.

Assessment did not come up under this heading, except that some students observed that they could drastically cut down the work necessary to pass a module by picking essay-titles early on and directing their learning solely to those topics. At one institution, students also commented on the enormous additional effort it takes to get a high rather than a low upper second class mark.

6. How do university essays differ from any essays you have written previously?

School experience varied. Many students described pre-university essay-writing as a mechanical exercise in the arrangement of required points into model answers, with no room for the student to develop an independent view. Others reported that their A-level teachers demanded much the same intellectual independence as at university (but such teachers often had some connection with or experience of university-level teaching). Some students suggested that unlike school, university assessment offers no rewards for using pompous vocabulary. One student said that at school, you answer the question, while at university you go beyond the question. She had some difficulty then explaining what 'beyond' means, as she recognised that there is no space for irrelevant digressions in a philosophy essay. Nevertheless, she was sure that at university, in philosophy, you have to do something with the question in addition to answering it directly.

The overwhelming consensus was that philosophy essays are different from essays in other disciplines. One student spoke of 'getting your history brain off and your philosophy brain on'. Philosophy essays, the students claimed, require more self-reliance because there is no required correct answer; rote-learning will not suffice. Students have to do their own research and create their own arguments.

Expressing your own view is experienced as a risk—but also as an opportunity that is often not available at school or college. It was claimed that undergraduate philosophy essays offer greater freedom, but also greater rigour. 'Philosophy,' observed one mature student, 'is the only subject where you are allowed to say 'I think".

Some of these differences sound like distinctions of level (between school or college and university). However, when asked, the students were emphatic that the deep differences are specific to the discipline rather than the level. This view was particularly strong among students who had studied philosophy at A-level.

Students in two groups observed some variety in the methodological advice coming from university tutors. Specifically, some tutors like to see ideas embedded in some historical context, while others regard historical detail as irrelevant. The students were bemused by this, but they noticed that tutors who differ in this respect do not seem to disagree when moderating marks. Moreover, students recognised that tutors reward essays that offer good arguments for conclusions with which the tutors disagree. They were aware of differences in doctrine between their tutors but less aware of differences in philosophical method and approach.

Discussion

Students in these groups had no difficulty explaining why they came to university. This may be a selection effect, because the participating students were all volunteers. Perhaps a more randomly selected sample would have shown less evidence of prior reflection. We noted the splits between job-related and educational motives, and between attitudes of gratitude and entitlement. The design of this exercise did not allow us to consider statistical relations (if any) between these divisions. Students were well aware of (and, as noted, in some cases critical of) the employability agenda, but they did not spontaneously produce the argument that philosophy provides skills transferable to employment. If our sample is at all typical, it would seem that local and national efforts to embed this idea in the student culture have met with limited success.

The fact that students' answers to question two were almost all in terms of their own interests and goals suggests that universities do not communicate their whole missions to their undergraduates (though it may also indicate some self-absorption among the students). Most universities recognise stakeholders other than their undergraduates, and have multiple strategic aims in addition to excellence in undergraduate education. Almost all of the students in these groups were oblivious to the wider aims and constituencies that universities serve. However, students are aware of their universities' public relations and marketing efforts. For example, the students at the former HE college knew that they were at a 'teaching-focused' university and it seems that this was presented to them as a benefit. Moreover, students' answers on the nature of philosophy essays were suspiciously similar to the standard messages in philosophy subject guides, and in general, the students in these groups seemed to have absorbed the discipline's own idealised self-description as free, rigorous, critical thought. So, students are aware of what their discipline says about itself, and of what their university tells them about itself, but are not aware of the university's broader mission. As universities do not communicate their strategic goals to their students, it is no surprise to hear students asking questions of the form: *why are they spending our fees on X, which has nothing to do with teaching?* It may be that X has third-stream funding and serves one of the strategic aims that the students have not been told about.

Students' indifference to and ignorance of their universities' research activities surprised us, especially in the Russell Group institutions. There was one significant exception. A final-year student (not in a Russell Group institution) observed that university is a safe place to articulate your own thoughts because in their research, lecturers also hazard their opinions, that is, they run the same emotional risk as students. For this reason, she associated the open discussion at university (in contrast to the closed curriculum of school) with the fact that lecturers are researchers who positively welcome new thoughts and points of view. This thought, about parity of emotional risk between lecturer-researchers and intellectually autonomous students, is largely absent from the existing literature on the teaching research nexus (see Jenkins *et al.* for a summary discussion).

The students' indifference to the research activities of their universities connects with the most striking result of this exercise: the consequences of the low contact times for humanities students. Students arrive at university knowing that they will have to work more independently. However, they typically imagine that this means working in isolation, and the sparse timetable of classes we offer them confirms this misapprehension.[5] Many do not realise that 'independent study' means intellectual autonomy rather than physical isolation. They have to learn for themselves (as it is rarely explained) that a group of students can work

autonomously (in the sense that they devise their own question and do their own research), and conversely you can work alone on a pre structured (and therefore tutor-dependent) task.

The connection between low contact time and research culture is this: researchers collaborate. We form reading groups, listen to each other's papers in research seminars, read each other's drafts, give each other ad hoc tutorials and suggest sources. Students often do not know that collaboration is normal in academia. In the humanities in particular, most research is the work of a single academic and most research products are single-author documents. We acknowledge help from others in small-print, in a preface or at the foot of a page, where few first-year students are likely to notice it. Jenkins et al argue that the teaching research nexus does not come about automatically. It has to be forged. Discussing the practicalities, they observe that:

> ...in many of the sciences, much research is team and project based; and this creates opportunities for involving undergraduate and postgraduate students in (staff-led) research. This is possible in the Humanities... but this involves a very conscious going against the disciplinary grain of individualistic research in the humanities. (pp. 35-36).

It may be possible to involve undergraduates in historical research (by having them trawl archives or transcribe interviews), but it is less clear how this might be done in philosophy. Further, the challenge is to change the perceptions of the mass of undergraduates early in their first years. Finding research assistants among the final year students will not achieve this. In any case, such tasks will not teach the vital lesson, namely that philosophers are invariably *in dialogue* with others, and almost invariably enjoy collaborative relationships of one kind or another. Intellectual independence does not mean intellectual autarky. On the contrary, becoming intellectually independent involves developing a network of supportive intellectual relationships—and gaining the skills and virtues necessary to sustain such relationships.

The individualistic culture of humanities research shows itself in typical 'how to study' guides, in that they tend to focus on solitary activities. Even the otherwise excellent *Doing Philosophy* mentions interaction with other students just twice (pp. 93-4 and 159-60). Both these brief discussions suppose that 'study-buddy' relationships are already in place, and offer no advice on how to initiate or sustain them. Being a critical friend requires qualities more like those of a teacher than of a student. That may be why Briggs' *Teaching for Quality Learning at University* offers a very short note on student learning partners (p. 112), but a longer discussion of critical friendship (pp. 154- 5) in the chapter on 'The Reflective Teacher'. Again, these discussions assume that such relationships require no special virtues or nurturing beyond those found in any other kind of friendship.

Undergraduates are unlikely to realise quite how much help professional philosophers get from each other unless we make a point of showing them. School is for the most part an individual effort aimed at individual goals (though some schools do employ assessed group work). On arrival at university, students receive terrifying warnings about plagiarism and collusion, without quite grasping how collusion differs from collaboration. This, together with the misunderstood instruction to 'work independently', confirms to them that university must be a solitary struggle.

There are easy things we can do to change this. First, we can explain to students the difference between independence and isolation, and encourage collaboration by building peer-support activities into programmes.[6] Such activities might include criticising each other's essay plans or proofreading each other's essays, but not, for this purpose, group work, because the point is to learn how to get help with your individual work without cheating. Second, we can offer our own research culture as a model of academic mutual support. The student responses in this study suggest that the staff research effort and culture is scarcely visible to all but a small minority of students. Those students who were aware of staff research rarely regarded it as a benefit or a model—perhaps because their view of it is partial, and chiefly experienced as detrimental to teaching. We can change that simply by talking about it, with a particular emphasis on how we write rather than what we write, and the help we get from peers.

Schools and colleges can play their part too, first by giving students opportunities to develop the habits and capacities necessary for effective time-management,[7] and second, by encouraging students to come to university with the intention of forming supportive, studybuddy relationships with others on their courses. In general, we would urge schools and colleges to work on preparing students for university in addition to getting them into university. Responses in this study to questions about essay-writing and about supportive intellectual relationships ('study-buddies') suggest that these two tasks do not coincide. Existing research supports this point. Cook and Lowe found that 'Student study habits formed in secondary school persist to the end of the first semester of university life.' (2003, 53). This would not be a problem if the study-habits formed in secondary school were appropriate to university. Rectifying this may require an effort from academics to engage with schools and colleges to explain what qualities they hope to find in incoming students. A study by the Sutton Trust (Tough *et al.*) found links between schools and universities to be ad hoc and fragile, and that 'Teachers' knowledge and understanding of the sector is too often narrow and outdated' (2008, 11). The converse may also be true. School and college teachers regularly complain of the lack of time for detailed in-class discussion, but the time-pressures under which AS and A2 teachers labour is perhaps less well known than it ought to be in the university sector.[8] Booth, in his 2009 essay on the transition of history students from school to university, observes that 'Unfortunately, in recent years the gap between school and university teachers appears to have widened, not least due to the pressures of the Research Assessment Exercise in universities and time pressures in schools'. In Booth's view, this gap explains why, 'Whilst learning activities are broadly similar at school and university, tutor and student constructions of what these activities signify can diverge. For example, critical reading often holds different meanings for students and history tutors. Even the meaning and purpose of seminars, essay writing, assessment and feedback are not uncommonly construed differently.'[9] Booth is surely correct that schools do not wilfully fail to prepare their students for university.

Regarding essay-writing, the tendency of GCSE and AS/A2-level assessment to discourage risk-taking and intellectual autonomy is not news. Forward-looking schools are increasingly abandoning GCSEs and A-levels in favour of the International Baccalaureate (James & Seldon 2009), because the IB offers students greater scope for intellectual independence and initiative. The fact that only one exam board (AQA) currently offers A-level Philosophy does not help matters. A few of the students we spoke to explained that their schools encouraged curiosity and intellectual autonomy in spite of the tendency of the examination system to drive out these virtues. Those schools, we imagine, are not under pressure to raise their performance in formal assessments and can afford to pursue education and examination

success in tandem. Other students reported that their A-level experience was entirely tuned to assessment and concentrated on rote learning of required content. These students were not well prepared for university in general and undergraduate philosophy in particular. For them, the leap from reproducing required material to doing their own research and making their own arguments is strenuous, and in some cases painful. Universities already offer support and training to help students to adjust to university-style writing, and no doubt we could do more. However, time pressures notwithstanding, we would urge schools and colleges to consider the consequences for the students of focussing exclusively on formal outcomes at the expense of developing intellectual autonomy.

Within university, we should ask what we can do (in addition to the measures suggested here) to encourage those students most in need of good study-buddies to seek them out (rather than finding comfort with other students with similar school experiences).

As noted above, the peer-support aspect of student life receives little attention from writers on philosophical teaching and learning. In the sixteen issues of *Discourse* (formerly The PRS-LTSN Journal) there is just one article on the topic (Hawley 2002). In the same issue, John Sellars' comprehensive review of six volumes of the American journal *Teaching Philosophy* shows that this is not a uniquely British lacuna. Yet beginning students in philosophy, no less than academic philosophers, require critical friends among their peers. And philosophy and religious studies teachers in schools, colleges and universities need a better understanding of how to encourage and sustain such friendships. Fortunately, in the educational literature, there is a burgeoning body of work on learning communities, communities of practice, communities of inquiry, etc. A further study, which we shall pursue during the academic year 2009/10, will first survey and report on this research insofar as it bears on the typical assessment instruments and aims of undergraduate philosophy education. Its second phase will seek to apply selected themes from the philosophy of friendship (such as the importance of the difference between friendship and flattery, and the relationship between friendship and justice) to encouraging new undergraduates to think about how best to form beneficial intellectual friendships. Its third phase will explore the present perceptions of the target population, current year 12 and 13 school students, on co-operation and collusion in essay-writing.

Combining the three phases will enable us to make practical recommendations for the encouragement and legitimisation of peer intellectual friendships among philosophy students, uniting both philosophical reflection and proposals for action, both for staff and students.

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Endnotes

1. We would like to thank the Subject Centre for Philosophical and Religious Studies for its interest in and financial support for this project. Thanks also to the students who participated in the focus groups and the staff at each institution who helped to put these groups together.
2. By 'seminars' we meant group discussion-based classes; what in some of our institutions were labelled 'tutorials'.
3. Other responses were more idiosyncratic, our favourite being 'I was a terrible electrician.'
4. Newman, John Henry, *The Idea of a University Defined and Illustrated* (1854).
5. One of the student voices in Longden & Yorke regretted not having made 'sure I was really organised and prepared as it is mainly singular study. Having come straight from achieving higher A levels in sixth form, this has been a shock. Sometimes brutal.' (p. 42) Another complained of 'Lots of time between sessions wasted' (ibid.), apparently unaware that such time could be spent in discussion with other students.
6. 'The qualitative data point to the importance of the making of friendships in the higher education experience. Institutions can assist in this process through the pedagogic approaches they adopt – for example, by engaging students early on in activities that involve collaboration.' (Longden & Yorke p. 43)

7. Longden and Yorke report that in their study, more students identified 'workload and time management' as the worst aspect of their first-year experience than any other (p. 37).
8. This was a major theme that came up in discussion at 'A Level Above? Progression to Undergraduate Studies in Philosophy', the Subject Centre conference at St Anne's College, Oxford, on 2-3 July 2009.
9. Like the present study, Booth starts with the 'disjunction between tutor and student perceptions of the motivation, skills and abilities that students bring to university.' He notes that, 'Whilst history students at both school and university see the teacher as their most important resource, new undergraduates often see the tutor as the 'expert' who can (and perhaps should) give them 'the information'. By contrast university history teachers emphasise the need for student autonomy and independent judgement.' However, he does not suggest, as we do, that students achieve autonomy by getting help from their peers as well as their teachers.