Chapter 3

Students' experiences of higher education

Introduction

3.1 This chapter describes students' experiences of and views on higher education. It focuses on their teaching and assessment and on the type of skills they had acquired since starting their course.

What were students' experiences of and views on their teaching?[13]

What teaching and learning methods were used on the students' course?

3.2 The four most widely used teaching methods (Table 3.1) to which the majority of both full- and part-time students were exposed were:

- lectures (98%);
- seminars and tutorials (91%);
- essays (82%);
- projects and dissertations (82%).

3.3 In contrast, the teaching methods least likely to be used were: individual sessions with teaching staff (30%); work placements as part of a sandwich course (15%); and work experience (16%).

3.4 By far the greatest variations in the methods used were associated with the subjects students studied (Table 3.1). For instance, nearly all science students were involved in practicals (96%) and laboratory work (82%) compared with just around one in ten students studying the humanities. Nearly all education students (94%) wrote essays during their course compared with only one in four (39%) students studying mathematics and computing. Two-thirds of students (67%) taking creative arts courses experienced individual sessions with teaching staff while only a fifth (19%) of multidisciplinary students did so.

3.5 Generally, part-time students were less likely than full-time students to experience the more unusual teaching methods such as computer-based learning packages (31% compared to 57%), and workshops (27% compared with 47%) (Table 2 - Statistical Appendix). Part-time students also had fewer opportunities for individual sessions with teaching staff (20% compared with 37%) as did students in 'pre-1992 universities'. This may be of concern, given the additional support and encouragement part-time students may require.[14]

Table 3.1 – Type of teaching and learning methods used on course by subject studied

Type of teaching and learning methods experienced	Column percentages*										
	Medicine/ dentistry/ health related to medicine	Mathematics computing	Sciences	Engineering/ tech/ architecture	Social science/ studies	Humanities/ law languages	Creative arts	Education	Multi-disciplinary	Not answered	All
Lectures	98	98	100	99	100	98	96	98	96	100	98
Seminars/tutorials	92	88	87	94	92	97	96	88	75	88	91
Projects/dissertations	89	72	90	95	76	74	96	84	74	74	82
Essays	89	39	78	58	93	91	92	94	84	73	82
Practicals	70	55	96	76	33	12	67	64	39	42	49
Computer-based learning packages	52	52	72	65	58	28	39	37	44	36	48
Lab/worksop sessions	53	46	82	77	28	15	49	44	20	18	40
Individual sessions with teaching staff	31	19	27	31	29	28	67	42	19	26	31
Work experience	33	0	13	12	10	7	24	60	12	7	16
Work placements	16	20	22	23	13	9	11	18	12	14	15
Weighted base (=N)	*100*	*64*	*80*	*134*	*196*	*230*	*67*	*83*	*86*	*41*	*1,081*

*Individuals could give more than one answer
Source: PSI Survey of Students, 1997
Individual Take-Up of NVQ/SVQs [illegible], Department for Education, The Stationery Office, London

How much time did students devote to their studies?

3.6 All full-time students spent an overall average of 31 hours a week studying. Most of their time was not spent in formal teaching situations but on studying independently. Part-time students studied for an overall average of 14 hours every week and also spent most of this time on independent study.[15] This was in addition to the time they spent in paid work. It must be remembered, however, that the majority had been given some paid time off work by their employer to undertake their studies (Chapter 2). Even so, the demands on part-time students were substantial given their other commitments, suggesting high levels of motivation.

3.7 The average number of hours spent by all full-time students on studying did not vary greatly. However, how they apportioned their time varied considerably depending on which types of teaching modes they experienced. The average amounts of time spent on each of these teaching modes, only for those exposed to them, are outlined in Table 3.2. How students used their time varied by the subject they studied, reflecting the different teaching methods employed in different subject areas. For instance, full-time science students spent on average twice as much time as full-time creative arts students in lectures (9 hours compared with 4 hours per week) while these creative arts students spent twice as much time as these science students working on practicals and projects (16 hours compared to 7 hours per week).

Table 3.2 – Average number of hours per week spent studying on each teaching mode where students experience that mode

Teaching and learning method	Number of hours	
	Full-time students	Part-time students
Lectures	8	5
Seminars/tutorials	4	2
Projects/practicals	6	3
Other teaching situation	4	4
Independent study	15	8
Weighted base (=N)	*697*	*390*

Source: PSI Survey of Students, 1997

What did students think about their teaching methods?

3.8 Nearly three-quarters (73%) of students were content with the mix of teaching methods used on their course, one in ten were not, whilst the remainder were neither content nor discontent. Their attitudes were unaffected by issues related to their course, institution, and even the subjects they studied.

3.9 In contrast, students had much more mixed feelings about the size of their classes. Two-fifths of all students either strongly agreed or agreed with the statement that they 'would like more opportunities to learn in small groups'. Full-time students and those doing degrees particularly wanted such learning opportunities, as did students studying mathematics and creative arts. Such learning situations are not only more enjoyable for some students (and staff) but also help instill essential life skills such as team working. They are, however, resource-intensive.

What were students' experiences of and views on their teaching staff?[16]

Who taught the students?

3.10 Teaching was predominately conducted by lecturers including professorial staff (Table 3.3). Postgraduate students were used to teach undergraduates but taught very few non-degree students. They were most likely to take seminars or tutorials and most (60%) undergraduates had had some of their seminars taken by postgraduates.

3.11 Postgraduates were also much more likely to be teaching in 'pre-1992' rather than '1992' universities and to have a wider range of teaching responsibilities. Twice as many full-time students at 'pre-1992', rather than '1992', universities had some of their seminars or tutorials taken by postgraduates (51% compared to 25%). Nearly three times as many of these students at 'pre-1992', rather than at '1992', universities had practicals run by postgraduates (38% compared with 15%); attended laboratory/ workshop sessions conducted by postgraduates (31% compared to 10%); and had had computer-based learning packages fielded by postgraduates (25% compared to 8%).

Table 3.3 – Type of teaching staff involved

Teaching and learning method	Column percentages*								
	Lecturers including professors			Postgraduates			Others		
	Full-time	Part-time	All	Full-time	Part-time	All	Full-time	Part-time	All
Lecturers	98	89	96	17	15	16	12	12	12
Seminars/tutorials	94	68	85	38	18	31	11	9	11
Essays	76	57	70	14	8	12	6	10	7
Projects/dissertations	78	60	74	17	9	14	12	12	12
Practicals	51	30	44	27	5	19	13	6	10
Computer-based learning packages	48	23	39	17	5	13	10	4	8
Laboratory/workshop sessions	48	23	36	21	5	15	9	5	8
Individual sessions with teaching staff	34	17	28	7	2	6	4	2	3
Work experience	10	2	7	2	0	2	17	2	12
Work placements	11	2	8	3	0	1	14	2	9

*Individuals could give more than one answer
Base: all for each teaching method
Source: IES Survey of Students, 1997

What did students think about the people who taught them?

3.12 Irrespective of students' exposure to postgraduates and teaching assistants, the majority (60%) did not think that such staff were used too often for teaching, with less than one in ten thinking that they were. Yet, students had more mixed feelings about the amount of contact they had had with senior staff or the head of their department; equal proportions would have liked more contact (28%) and would not (27%).

3.13 Despite the increasing pressures on some academic staff to undertake research, only one sixth (15%) of all students believed that staff were more interested in their research than teaching. Just under a half (48%) did not believe this was true while the remainder (37%) neither agreed nor disagreed. Nearly three times as many full-time (19%) as part-time (7%) students believed that staff were more interested in their research than teaching, otherwise there were few differences in students' opinion.

3.14 Students were critical of the academic support they received from staff (Table 3.4). Most serious of all was concern about the feedback they got on their work, which is essential if students are to progress and learn from their mistakes. Less than half (48%) of all students were either very satisfied or satisfied with the feedback and over a quarter (26%) were either dissatisfied or very dissatisfied. This inadequacy was more acutely felt by full-time than part-time students (30% compared with 20%) and those students who were least likely to have individual teaching sessions with staff.

Table 3.4 – Students' attitudes towards their teaching and support

Issue	Row percentages		
	Very satisfied and satisfied	Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied	Dissatisfied and very dissatisfied
Quality of academic support received	59	26	15
Amount of academic support received from staff	53	27	20
Feedback from staff about work	48	26	26

Base: all
IES Survey of Students, 1997

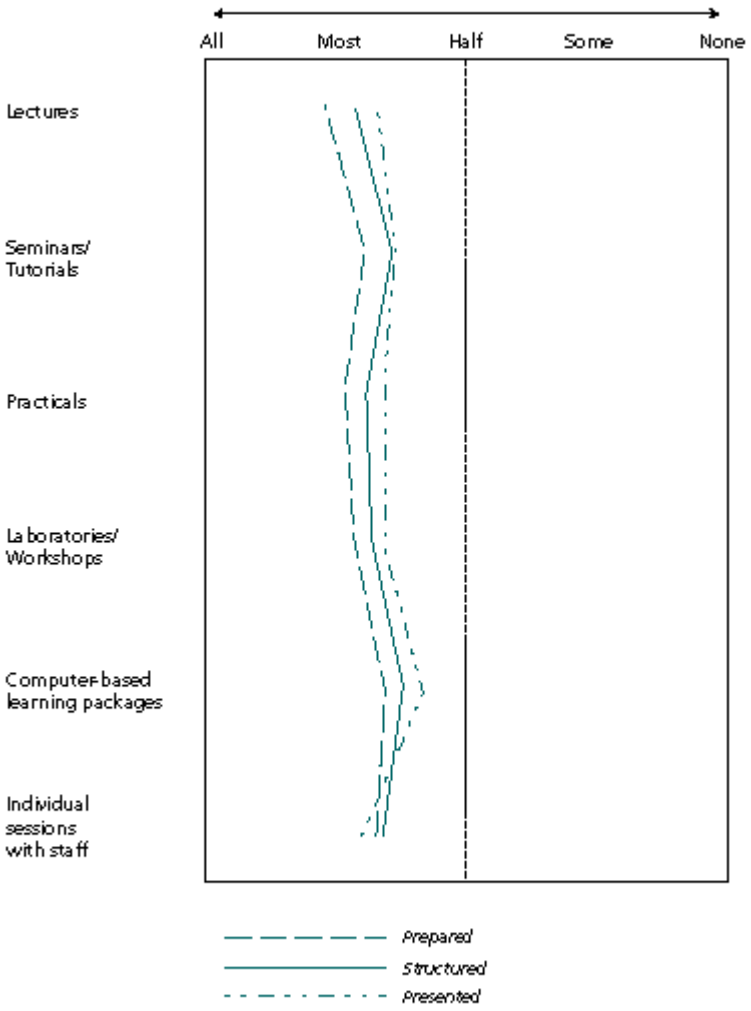
How did students rate the quality of their teaching?[17]

3.15 Overall, just over seven out of ten students were either satisfied or very satisfied with the quality of their teaching while one in ten were either dissatisfied or very dissatisfied. However, this captures students' levels of satisfaction at only a very general level. It tells us nothing about how they rated the different types of teaching methods they experienced. Nor does it tell us what aspects of the teaching they were satisfied with.

3.16 In order to explore these issues, students were asked to quantify the proportion of each teaching method used which was well prepared, well structured, and well presented, using a five-point scale from 1 (none of them) to 5 (all of them) (Chart 3.1).

3.17 Students rated between half and most of all the different teaching methods they experienced as well prepared, structured and presented (Chart 3.1). On the whole, they considered that more of their teaching was well prepared than either well structured or well presented. Although students' ratings of the different teaching modes did not vary greatly, lectures were the most highly rated of all teaching modes while computer-based learning packages were rated lowest (Table 3 - Statistical Appendix). This suggests that such packages will need further development before they can be used as widely as advocated by some commentators.

Chart 3.1 – Students' rating of the proportion of each teaching method which was well prepared, well structured and well presented



3.18 Full- and part-time students' assessments of the quality of their teaching were very similar, as were those of students attending 'pre-1992' and '1992' universities. Despite the large variations in the teaching methods used in different subject areas, students' evaluation of their teaching did not vary greatly or consistently by the subject they studied. Thus those students most exposed to a particular learning method were no more critical than those with less experience of the method. Nor did students' ratings of their teaching vary by who taught them - postgraduates and academic staff were equally rated.

What were students' experiences of and views on their assessment?[18]

What assessment methods were used on the students' course?

3.19 The majority of students experienced the following assessment methods at some stage during their course (Table 3.5):

- Essays (87%);
- Written examinations (86%);
- Projects/dissertations (81%);
- Oral presentations (73%).

3.20 The greatest variations in students' exposure to these assessment methods were associated with the subjects they had studied (Table 3.5). For instance, nearly all students taking humanities courses (97%) were examined by essays compared with well under a half of students following mathematics and computing courses (46%). The vast majority of science students (97%) had written examinations compared with less than half (46%) of students studying creative arts. Mathematics students were much less likely to be assessed via oral presentations, by contrast with engineering students (53% compared with 80%).

3.21 There were also some differences in students' experiences of these assessment methods by whether their course was full- or part-time, degree or non-degree and the type of institution they attended (Table 4 - Statistical Appendix). However, none of these differences were of a magnitude similar to those associated with the subjects studied.

3.22 The assessment methods most frequently used on students' courses were also the ones which most often contributed towards their final qualification, with the exception of oral presentations (Table 5 - Statistical Appendix). Once again, the use of particular methods varied most widely by subject area.

Table 3.5 – Type of assessment used on course by subject studied

	Column percentages										
Assessment methods used on course	Medicine/ dentistry/ health related to medicine	Maths-matical/ computing	Sciences	Engineering/ tech/ architecture	Social science/ studies	Humanities/ law/ languages	Creative arts	Education	Multi-disciplinary	Subject unknown	All
Essays	91	46	83	66	96	97	92	96	96	86	87
Written examinations	85	94	98	95	90	97	46	57	78	91	86
Projects/dissertations	86	73	90	97	79	71	90	84	74	77	81
Oral presentations	71	53	74	80	74	73	79	76	75	73	73
Other coursework	44	54	50	66	37	32	74	49	50	37	46
Practical write-ups	55	36	97	73	31	8	35	49	27	19	39
Multiple-choice questions	49	36	47	33	33	22	7	26	31	44	31
Work-based learning	39	7	16	19	19	10	30	65	13	13	22
Weighted base (=N)	*98*	*64*	*81*	*136*	*197*	*231*	*67*	*84*	*85*	*41*	*1,084*

Source: 03 Survey of Students, 1997

What did students think about their assessment methods?

3.23 The majority of students understood what was expected of them in their assessment. Nearly six in ten agreed with the statement 'what I have to do to get a high grade is clear to me'. However, a sizeable minority disagreed (25%) which brings into question the transparency of the assessment systems. Students' views on this did not vary by factors associated with their course, institution or subject.

3.24 Transparent assessment is one component of a credible assessment

system; another is its fairness. The majority of students believed that all the assessment methods used in their course fairly judged both their knowledge and understanding (Table 3.6) and their intellectual and other skills (Table 3.7), with the exception of multiple-choice questions. However, more thought that these methods fairly assessed their knowledge and understanding than their intellectual and other skills.

Table 3.6 – Students' views on the fairness of assessment methods to assess their intellectual and other skills

Method	Row percentages								
	Fairly			Neither fairly nor unfairly			Unfairly		
	Full-time	Part-time	All	Full-time	Part-time	All	Full-time	Part-time	All
Project/dissertation	84	86	85	14	13	14	2	1	1
Essays	78	81	79	19	17	18	3	2	3
Practical write-ups	65	72	66	32	25	30	3	3	4
Work-based learning	66	77	68	30	18	27	4	5	5
Other course work	61	71	64	37	26	34	2	3	2
Written examination	53	60	55	25	25	25	22	15	20
Oral presentations	61	60	61	29	30	29	10	10	10
Multiple-choice questions	32	46	35	46	45	46	22	9	19

Base: all for each assessment method
Source: HE Survey of Students, 1997

Table 3.7 – Students' views on the fairness of assessment methods to assess their knowledge and understanding

Method	Row percentages								
	Fairly			Neither fairly nor unfairly			Unfairly		
	Full-time	Part-time	All	Full-time	Part-time	All	Full-time	Part-time	All
Project/dissertation	85	90	86	13	9	12	2	1	2
Essays	83	90	85	14	14	12	3	3	3
Practical write-ups	73	83	75	24	15	22	3	2	3
Work-based learning	68	78	71	28	19	26	4	3	3
Other course work	64	82	69	34	17	29	2	1	2
Written examination	63	69	65	17	19	18	20	11	17
Oral presentations	61	64	62	27	26	27	12	9	11
Multiple-choice questions	44	53	46	40	36	39	16	11	15

Base: all for each assessment method
Source: HE Survey of Students, 1997

3.25 The assessment methods students were most likely to perceive as fair in assessing their knowledge and understanding were:

- projects and dissertations (86%);
- essays (85%);
- practical write-ups (75%).

3.26 These first two assessment methods were also considered the fairest in gauging students' intellectual and other skills but so too was work-based learning (68%).

3.27 The methods students were most likely to believe to be unfair in judging both intellectual and other skills were:

- written examinations (20%);
- multiple-choice questions (19%);
- oral presentation (10%).

3.28 Written examinations were one of the most widely used assessment

methods.
3.29 Part-time students were more likely to consider that their assessment methods fairly gauged all their skills, while full-time students were more likely to be undecided by reporting that the methods were neither fair nor unfair (Tables 3.6 and 3.7). There were, however, no differences in students' views by the type of educational institution they attended.
3.30 There were no consistent differences in students' opinions by the subject they were studying, although differences existed. For instance, science students were more likely than others to think that written examinations were fair, while students studying education were the most likely to consider them (and multiple-choice questions) unfair. More important, there was no evidence to suggest that where students were highly exposed to an assessment method that they were more likely to be critical of that method.

How often were students assessed and what did they think about the frequency of their assessment?

3.31 Most students were assessed at the end of every term or semester (60%) or at the end of each module or course (54%). Only a minority (37%) were examined only at the end of the academic year or in the final year of their course.
3.32 This pattern of assessment was primarily associated with the twin trends towards continuous assessment and towards the modularisation of courses. Four out of five of all students had at least some element of continuous assessment within their course.In addition, three-quarters of all students were undertaking modular courses and they were much less likely than those on non-modular courses to be examined at the end of the academic year (33% compared with 56%) or in their final year (33% compared to 52%).
3.33 The subjects studied also affected how often students were assessed (Table 6 - Statistical Appendix). Science students in particular were the most frequently assessed - nearly six out of ten were examined weekly and/or monthly. They were ten times more likely than education students to be assessed weekly (30% compared to 3%). At the opposite end of the time-span, 46% of engineering students were assessed in their final year compared with 28% of mathematics and computing students.
3.34 The majority (63%) of students, however, did not think that they were assessed too frequently and only about one in twenty thought that they were. Those students who were assessed most often tended to think they were assessed too frequently. Thus only 45% of science students did not believe they were assessed too frequently. Students' opinions were unaffected by whether they were pursuing a modular or non-modular course.

What skills had students acquired since starting their course?

3.35 One consequence of the rising number of graduates entering the labour market, and of an increasingly competitive labour market, is that employers are increasingly scrutinising the quality of graduates. In particular, numerous studies suggest that employers want more from graduates. In addition, they are looking for a range of technical competences and transferable skills, along with general personal and entrepreneurial attributes in their potential recruits. However, employers are not homogeneous, their needs and requirements are

different and they often cannot identify exactly what they want from graduates[19]. Indeed, consultations with employers undertaken by the NCIHE suggest that equal proportions of employers are satisfied and dissatisfied with graduates' skills.[20] Many of these issues have been encapsulated in debates about 'graduateness' and the employability of graduates.

3.36 We therefore questioned students about a range of skills they may have acquired since starting their course. In particular, we asked them whether these skills had improved, deteriorated or stayed the same, as earlier research has shown that amongst some students there is evidence of deterioration (Table 3.6). We have grouped these skills into three categories: (traditionally) 'academic skills'; 'personal development skills'; and 'enterprise skills'. Inevitably, there is some overlap between these three categories.

3.37 The majority of all students felt that all their skills had improved since starting their course, and especially their analytical (81%) and communication skills (69%). There was one exception - numeracy skills. Only one in three students thought that this skill had improved while the majority believed that it had stayed the same.

3.38 Students' assessment of their numeracy skills and their computing and writing skills was heavily influenced by the subjects they had studied. At one extreme, three-fifths of mathematics/computing students reported that their numeracy skills had improved compared to fewer than one in ten creative arts students. Three-quarters of students involved in mathematics, computing and science reported that their computing and IT skills had got better while fewer than half of those studying humanities reported such a change. Three-quarters of social science students had witnessed an improvement in their writing skills compared to less than a quarter of science students.

3.39 There was no evidence to suggest, as other research has, that students at '1992 universities' were more likely than those at 'pre-1992 universities' to have developed their personal development or enterprise skills.

Table 3.6 – The extent to which students' skills had improved since starting their course

Skill	Row percentages								
	Improved			Deteriorated			Stayed the same		
	Full-time	Part-time	All	Full-time	Part-time	All	Full-time	Part-time	All
Academic skills									
Analytical	85	76	81	1	0	1	15	22	18
Absorbing information	70	63	67	5	2	4	25	35	29
Numeracy	29	28	30	14	2	9	57	70	61
Writing	60	61	60	6	2	4	34	37	36
Computing	70	47	63	4	1	3	26	51	35
Personal development									
Self-motivation	51	56	52	17	6	13	32	38	35
Using initiative	71	52	64	2	0	2	27	48	34
Working independently	69	53	64	3	1	2	28	46	34
Self-confidence	70	51	63	4	2	3	26	47	33
Enterprise skills									
Communication skills	76	59	69	2	0	2	22	41	29
Planning time and work	55	52	54	11	4	8	34	44	38
Team working	68	44	60	2	1	2	30	55	38

*Individuals could give more than one answer
Weighted base: full-time students = 672; part-time students = 230
Source: IES Survey of Students, 1997

3.40 How do these findings feed into the existing debates about 'graduateness'

and the employability of graduates? And how do they relate to students' key reason for entering higher education - namely, their desire to improve their labour-market prospects? Perhaps the most telling finding in terms of the current debates was that part-time students and those undertaking non-degree courses were the least likely to report an improvement in their skills, especially those skills particularly valued by employers. These students are already employed and it may well be that they had already developed these skills before starting their course, although their analytical skills had markedly improved. High proportions of full-time students, who were mainly new labour-market entrants, reported improvements in all their skills.

What were students' attitudes towards their course in general?

3.41 Given the divergent experiences of the students, especially in relation to the subjects they studied, it is interesting to explore whether these led to different levels of satisfaction with their course in general.
3.42 Four out of five students were either very satisfied or satisfied with their course in general. They voiced these sentiments irrespective of: whether they were doing a full- or part-time course; the qualification they were following; the subject they were studying; and the type of institution they were attending.
3.43 A similar proportion (79%) of students doing modular courses were either very satisfied or satisfied with their course. Again, students doing full- and part-time courses reported the same levels of satisfaction as did those taking different qualifications and at different types of institutions.
3.44 Students were, however, less content with the overall coherence of their course. Only a half did not believe that their course was too fragmented while one in five did. Apart from students following courses in creative arts and education, who were least likely to say that their course was fragmented, there were no other major differences in students' attitudes.

Conclusion

3.45 The most significant differences in students' experiences of teaching, learning, assessment and the skills they learnt were associated with the subjects studied. Despite these differing experiences, students generally had similar and positive attitudes towards their teaching and its quality, their assessment and its fairness, and their course in general.
3.46 However, students were critical of certain aspects of their educational experience. Some of their dissatisfaction could be associated with resource constraints and the changes in teaching methods which have resulted from these.[21] A quarter of all students wanted more opportunities to learn in small groups, and this is exactly the type of teaching which has been affected by resource constraints. Yet small-group learning was not only satisfying for students (and staff), it also helped to develop essential skills such as team working - skills highly valued by employers.
3.47 Students also were critical of the feedback they received from academic staff - under a half were satisfied. This too was associated with resource

constraints. The students particularly affected tended to be those who did not experience individual teaching sessions with staff. Although this teaching mode is also highly resource-intensive, obviously it gave students an important opportunity to receive feedback on their work.

3.48 The introduction of computer-based learning packages is another change in learning methods often related to resource constraints. Yet the quality of these packages was the least highly rated relative to other teaching and learning methods. If standards are to be maintained, these packages will need further development before they can be used as widely as advocated by some commentators.

3.49 Current debates about 'graduateness' and the employability of graduates have focused on the skills graduates need, and how often these are inadequate. Yet, the majority of all students felt that all their academic, personal development, and enterprise skills had improved since starting their course. The one frequent exception was numeracy skills, students' assessment of this skill, along with their computing and writing skills, was heavily influenced by the subject they had studied.

3.50 More full-time students than either part-time or non-degree students reported improvements in all their skills. The highest levels of improvement in the skills traditionally highly valued by employers took place among those students most in need of them - the new labour-market entrants. Thus, students' human resourcefulness - which will equip them not only for the workplace but for life - had progressed as a result of their experiences in higher education.