WORKING PAPER 96/15

Staff and Student Perspectives of Student Motivation Following Modularisation, a Tension in Academia

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Published August 1996

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Abstract

A questionnaire survey of undergraduate tutors asked about the nature and impact of students who take a strategic approach to their academic work. A qualitative survey of undergraduate views sought to balance staff views and investigate academic motivation. The surveys show that there is staff dissatisfaction with the academic effort made by some students and that much staff time is committed to the fruitless pursuit of the less academically motivated. Students are generally bright and intelligent with good A levels, but many activities, sports, cultural pursuits, and full or part-time paid employment compete for time. Real choices are made between academic and other commitments. Modularisation led to changes in teaching procedures and to publication of the rules for progression. Some students choose to work below their academic potential and use the time made available for other activities. The results highlight eight areas where the practical consequences of modularisation should be considered further.

Introduction

The expansion of the university sector through the 1990's has seen a real change in the student body and the general attitude to learning and education (Brown 1995, Green 1995). The ideas of a previous generation that a good degree would lead to a good job are no longer true. There is less opportunity for individual staff student contact as classes grow and the tutorial system is being reduced.
The main elements of change in the early 1990's are:

- Modularisation which led staff to rethink whole degree programmes.
- widened individual students access to elective subjects right across the universities.
- semesterisation of teaching with examinations following each semester.
- larger classes with a shift to small group and seminar support in classes of 12-30 rather than the traditional tutorial of 5.
- the publication and rationalisation of University Rules across institutions.

There is some support for the belief that these changes have had an adverse effect on teaching (Jenkins and Smith 1993, Unwin 1996).

At the same time many things were changing for the undergraduate. Most significantly the financial position with the advent of loans and increasing overdrafts (Barclays Bank 1996). The expense of attending university steadily increases. The employment position for graduates is more difficult. Increasing student numbers lead to ideas of 'student responsibility for learning', ideas perhaps better understood amongst staff than by students (Gibbs, 1985, 1994). With less staff student contact in class the student has become more isolated from academic staff and had more to do independently. Despite all the changes made at modularisation many universities did not modify procedures to monitor, discipline and control students academic activities.

Academic staff tend to assume that students want to be at university, and that they are interested in the degree subject they are studying. This paper presents some results that challenge these views. Kneale (1996) analysed the responses to a survey of undergraduate tutors which aimed to ascertain whether student demotivation and strategic choices are widespread. This paper considers some of those responses in the light of an additional survey of undergraduate's attitudes, linking their comments to those in the tutor's survey. While no-one would suggest that prior to modularisation academia was running perfectly a great many things changed at that time, not least student behaviour in class and attitude to the academic system. This research aims to look at some of the impacts and consequences of these changes.

Staff Questionnaire Responses

A questionnaire asking about student motivation and responses was circulated to tutors in departments of Biology, Civil Engineering, English, French, Geography, Geology, History, and Philosophy in 12 old and 10 new universities. The questionnaire described students as being 'professional' in the sense that they were adopting a planned professional approach to their university life and integrating other activities of a sporting, cultural or financially

rewarding nature as their situation required. This drew some confusion in respondents who initially assumed the survey was asking about mature students with professional backgrounds. The term used here to describe student activities is 'strategic' in the sense that they are making strategic decisions about managing their lives. This use of the term should not be confused with 'strategic learners' as defined by Entwistle (1987).

The questionnaire drew 52 replies, of which 43 can be used for analysis, a response rate of just over 30%. Table 1 summarises the numbers of departments acknowledging some degree of strategic behaviour amongst their students. Two further positive responses came from old universities but the department were not identified and another from a Computer Studies department. Four Nil responses were returned from departments not initially targeted, Law, Medicine, Architecture and a faculty of Arts and Education.

Table 1: Numbers of departments reporting strategic students

Subject	English	History	Geography	Engineering	Biology
YES	2	1	6	2	5
NO	3	4	7	3	0
Total	5	5	13	5	5
Subject	Languages	Geology	Philosophy	Others	Total %
YES	1	1	0	3	41%
NO	4	3	2	4	59%
Total	4	4	2	7	

There may be some bias in the responses depending on the respondent, where replies came from Heads of Department over 80% reported no problems with strategic students. Where undergraduate tutors responded the answers were very full and in a number of cases ran to extra sides of notes.

Table 1 suggests that staff are recognising a small but present problem. Differences between subjects cannot be drawn from so small a sample, but it would seem that strategic behaviour is more common in departments which follow from main stream A' levels, such as biology and geography and is less evident in departments where a candidate makes a change in academic direction, to law, geology or philosophy for example. The line of least resistance when applying for places in higher education is to continue with a familiar subject. (Kneale 1996)

Table 2 summarises the results from the general questions that asked if staff had encountered students expressing the following views in the past 5 years. As Table 2 shows the majority of

departments are not finding student demotivation expressed verbally. However it is notable that the majority of the YES answers come from departments in the old university sector. Perhaps this reflects the fact that the old Polytechnic sector has always attracted students with a wide range of backgrounds and experience and those choosing more vocationally oriented degrees, where less academically oriented students are not a matter for concern or discussion.

Table 2: Responses to the Staff survey - general questions

	Agreed %	Disagreed %
Q. 'Presumably since you chose to study xxxx you are interested in some parts of the subject?' **A.** *"No"*	19	81
Q. 'You chose to come to university to do xxxx' **A.** *"No I didn't, I don't want to be at university, I want to be at work but there are no work alternatives where I live"*	13	88
Q. 'Why are you doing a degree at all?' **A.** *"because that's what you do after school isn't it?"*	30	70
Q. 'Why are you doing this subject in the first place?' **A.** *"that's what I found easiest at school, but I'm not really bothered about whether I do x or y, I don't really care."*	21	79
Q. 'Why did you fill out the UCAS form?' **A.** *"Didn't, our sixth form tutor handed around the UCCA/UCAS forms and we all kind of filled them in."*	5	95
Q. 'Why did you choose the University of xxxx' **A.** *"no reason, just put down 6 places at random, mostly we used football teams."*	10	90
"I never looked at a prospectus."	21	79

Table 3 lists additional statements of the Table 2 type, offered to tutors voluntarily by students.

Table 3: Statements from students reflecting their motivational influences at university.

- *I only came because it will help me get a better job.*
- *I am only doing this degree to get a job.*
- *It is what is expected of me*
- *My family insisted that I study for a profession / job, not the arts / social science degree I wished to do.*
- *My father insisted I do this degree.*
- Reading, Leeds, Birmingham and Manchester are quoted as universities chosen *'so I could go to the football.'*
- *I applied to sea*side universities *so I can surf*

- *.....for the night life, I wanted a course in a happening city.*
- *I don't need to pass this module, I'll pass (the year) anyway.*
- *I can pass the year without doing the course work, so stop hassling me to give it in.*
- *I do not read books.*
- *I have a right to a grant, it's not a privilege, and it's up to me how much work I do, not anyone else.*

A number of tutors who gave negative responses to the questions in Tables 1 and 2 indicated that they did see poorly motivated and less committed students, but that '*their behaviour is less blatant or confrontational than the questions in table 1 indicate*' (Kneale 1996). In terms of numbers, estimates of the proportion of students acting in a strategic manner ranged from none to '*most of the class*'. Some 43% stated that they saw students who placed their degree work at a lower priority than the academic staff would wish. A feeling of disappointment at '*teaching potential accountants, managers and sales persons rather than potential academics*' came through in the replies. Table 4 summarises further evidence of strategic behaviour offered by tutors. In modularising and semesterising there was a desire to widen access and choice of modules. Academics can look to amend the rules to make module completion compulsory, to make attendance compulsory, to make life difficult for staff and student alike. To do so is merely likely to lead to frustration for staff, registering students in class is time consuming, and misses the point that students are adults making adult decisions.

Table 4: Evidence offered for the existence of the Strategic student

- non-contribution in classes where no formal mark or credit is attached
- increased popularity of essay of coursework based modules
- non-attendance at modules where assessment is coursework based, particularly essay based modules where research can be entirely personal
- question spotting throughout modules
- late submission of work despite penalties
- attendance at modules only to the session where topics for assessment are covered
- decisions to miss examinations where continual assessment has already ensured a pass
- failure to complete continually assessed work after the minimum pass grade is achieved
- decisions to entirely ignore 10 or 20 credit modules where the requirement for progression is passing 100 of 120 credits.
- students prepared to explain that they are choosing to behave in the ways outlined above.

Most respondents could agree with the view that *'By second and third year most of these students have got involved, are performing'*, most get 2.2 degrees or better. Level 1 classes are identified as the primary area where there is limited incentive to perform well. If the

degree is classified on work at levels 2 and 3, there is little incentive to do more than the minimum at Level 1.

The survey identified a number of departments without strategic students. These were either in the old polytechnic sector or where modularisation had not been linked to changes in the rules for progression and degree classification. Where the penalties for module failure are very severe the 'strategic' student is less apt to emerge. A department where failure of one module reduces the final degree awarded by a class and two modules means failure of the entire degree, reports no evidence of strategic behaviour. Basically students cannot afford to ignore any part of the degree.

The tutor survey also asked about gender aspects of strategic behaviour (Ingleton 1995). Overall the comments suggested that women are as strategic as men but less likely to be blatant about it (Kneale 1986). There were also a number of positive comments re-mature students, male and female, who strategically juggle home, family and study commitments to maximise their academic opportunities.

Student Survey

Information on student responses to the comments in Tables 2 to 4 was sought via a series of interviews and from a three year linear survey of 450 student's attitudes to teaching and learning (Bull 1995). The majority of students were found to be happy, settled and knowing what is required. They have clear ideas about staff expectations. Asked directly "What gets you motivated?" replies included:

> Deadlines, fear of failure, pressure and stress, interesting work, lively lectures, when I know I am making progress, clearly explained relevant points, things I understand, getting lost in facts and issues, new material, books with structured diagrams examples and pictures, practical work, tackling an essay, desire to achieve a goal, when my friends are working, when there is nothing better to do.

Responses to the question "What is the biggest turnoff to learning?" can be subdivided under three general headings:

Teaching issues, large classes, boring lectures, essays, disinterested teachers, dictation and slow speakers, not being able to understand, reading irrelevant material, topics you dislike, lack of content, not being able to find the books, when it is too complex, examinations assessments and assignments, not being able to get help when you need it , no specific guidelines about what is needed.

Elective issues, going over A' level material AGAIN, when it is too difficult, no explanation of why we are doing this, having to take topics you do not wish to, reading on topics you dislike or are irrelevant.

Timing issues, when you could be elsewhere, 9.00 or sessions after 16.00, sessions between 12.00 and 2.00, three or more hours of successive classes, too heavy a workload. (Bull 1995)

Picking up these themes interviews were conducted linking to issues of student academic life, electives, assessment and time pressures. Results and comments are discussed here under each of these headings. Individuals comments are placed in italics. Given the arbitrary and varied backgrounds of interviewees from the Universities of Leeds, Durham, Hull and Southampton, and their wide range of departmental backgrounds, there is no intention here to quantify the responses, but to amplify the tutor survey with student views to give a picture of one aspect of academic life in 1996. Students from the old University sector were interviewed because the tutor survey had indicated more problems there, but student motivation in the new university sector should be studied.

Changing Attitudes

Staff approaches

University staff tend to:

- be totally committed to their subject,
- be aware of their subjects philosophical base and position within academic study
- assume the subject is intrinsically interesting to all students
- assume their subject material needs no justification
- have assertive personalities, and
- expect students to take all this academic baggage on board automatically.

Student responses suggest a greater ambivalence about these points.

Student approaches

Choice of Programme

The number of students who will admit to some bewilderment that they might have positively chosen their subject is small but present. (Table 2) From student responses *'OK I am doing geography but it could have been economics or history. It was more that I happened to be enjoying the geography that term rather than anything else'. 'Does it matter what you do? History, Sociology, Management, they are all the same really. I could get involved with any of them if I wanted to but there does not seem to be much point'. 'I did engineering because my father insisted' 'The careers teacher gave out the UCAS forms and we mucked about filling them in, OK some people knew what was going on, had looked places up, but most of us just put down the cities we fancied'.*

From the tutor survey '*Motivation is a major issue here, and is maybe increasingly problematic. We have problems here with students who are basically here to get a degree for employment purposes and are not necessarily interested in the subject matter'*. It does not matter what type of degree, any will do. A number of the interviewed students thought this entirely realistic. Most Arts or Social science based students know that the nature of the degree is not so important, '*so you might as well do something you enjoy'*, or has bonuses such as travel '*I like fieldwork and animals and things so I did biology'*.

At the start of session

Following modularisation in the old university sector undergraduate tutors started to notice a change in the types of questions that students were asking. Questions like:

'What is this for?', 'Do we have to attend?', 'Do I have to go to tutorials?' 'Is there a mark for this?', 'What does this count for?', 'If it is only 5% is it worth me doing it?', 'Do we have to go to electives?' 'The seminar/ workshop is not marked so why do we have to go?'

From the tutor survey *'suggestions that a student might like to attend xxxx because it will be useful are met with at times with open contempt'.* With modularisation came a parallel, hard nosed, attitude to work where the reward justifies the effort.

Isolation at Level 1.

I have yet to encounter a Level 1 student who really enjoys being taught in a class of 300 plus. Student response forms may undermine this comment but on probing further the satisfied Level 1 student likes the large class because *' you can hide in it, no one will ask you a question,' 'I thought university would be really difficult but in first year no one notices if you are there or not'.* There is safety in anonymity, safety also to be less engaged with the material.

Breaking up large classes for team work and discussion allows students to get to know each other, tackle the material and work together. Rewarding such work implies an enormous marking load if individuals are marked independently, that may be seen as too expensive although there are computer based options (Booth 1994, Kelly et. al 1996, Tait and Entwistle 1966, TLTP, 1994). But group work deserves group marks and since most real life work is undertaken in teams the team mark should stand and be valued. Where students do undertake teamwork comments like: *'it was fun', 'it was great to meet other people', 'I talked to people I didn't know were on the course,' 'I made new friends',* indicate that the social advantages are valued by undergraduates. On the downside the issue of slackers, or hangers on, seem to loom large with academic staff but rarely with undergraduates, presumably a function of local experience. There does seem to be much student tolerance for the less motivated, *'OK so xxxx didn't really do much of the work, but was fun to have around' 'It didn't matter too much because we had to say what proportion of the mark we should each get and most people are pretty honest about it'.* One group were fairly adamant that peer pressure, and negotiating marks sorted out most of the problem individuals and that even if it didn't, the benefits of working together outweighed the disadvantages of a couple of people getting some extra marks.

Assessment issues

Students are driven by assessment strategies (Entwistle 1987, Boud 1995). Comments from students who have not passed or were in danger of failing a module:

'I did the first five practicals and I have got 82%, so I can leave all the rest and still get a 37% pass mark', 'I have an 80 average on the course work, so I do not need to revise for the exam, I can miss it and pass with 40%.' 'I know I am capable of getting good marks for this module but it is not worth my time or effort, I can fail two modules this year. These all indicate an awareness of the precise value of each component element of a module in assessment. There is no direct relationship between quality learning and assessment (Erwin 1995, Race 1995a)

When a student fails a module the teacher tends to view this as a personal failure. Under modular rules we have to accept that some students will choose to do less well. Amongst reasons expressed by individuals for failure of specific modules, excluding those with illness or personal reasons, were:
'difficulty', 'it was too difficult to bother with', 'I didn't want to get my head around it', 'I can't get on with computers, so decided not to bother', ' I didn't mind doing the lectures but I am not into essays so I didn't do them', 'The classes were OK but I wasn't bothered about writing it,' 'I know all I had to do was hand in the exercises but I couldn't find the energy to do it'. A whole series of comments which to the frustrated undergraduate tutor indicates bone idleness, lack of motivation and a different attitude as compared with pre-modular responses. The cushion of freedom to fail modules allows for a more lax attitude. In the case of the last comment the student knew he had passed his first semester modules and would do well on the rest of the modules. So something that called for a small amount of additional energy was ' not worth the effort'. Passing or failing this module will not affect this mans final degree class, but on a transcript of marks it might count against him. (Parlour 1996).

There needs to be a balance between student review, peer review and external assessments to distinguish between modules with less good performanccs due to teaching led problems and those arising from student response.

As teachers we have either to accept that the occurrence of reduced performance or failure of a module is a current and valid attitude and accept that students leave universities with vastly different suites of experiences, or seek to change the situation. While it may irritate the tutor, the strategic student is optimising time and effort, concentrating on module elements for which there are rewards. The best students are using the time released for sport, drama and other activities, maximising their university experience and opportunities. The consequence of this well used freedom is similar behaviour from less committed students where the time released is used less actively. That is the individuals choice. If the rules allow failure then we must expect it to happen. In allowing students to fail 10 to 20 credits we teach them to 'play the system', to balance work and other activities. For some employers that is exactly the right training.

In a course that is genuinely academically progressive between levels, missing a particular module may lead to difficulties in successive years. In those specific cases it can be argued that the module be compulsory and passed. Assessment methods must be tailored to ensure that all essential components of the module are taught well and examined effectively. (Race 1995b) Such modules must be core components. Within the philosophy of modularisation to treat all modules in this manner would not be acceptable.

Length of Semester

At a modular level we have taken on some of the aspects of the North American teaching system. Observing teaching in Canada I would comment that at modularisation we adopted the shell of the system, semesterisation, examinations at the end of semester, greater elective choice but kept the English notion of Reading for a Degree. This concept requires time and reflection. Time for reflection is not compatible with examinations three days after the end of teaching. The modularisation of courses to a standard 75 hours per module and 60 credits per semester suggests a workload of 450 hours. Assuming a 37.5 hour working week that requires 12 weeks. If a student works solidly for 8 hours per day, without illness, then this is an achievable target. If teaching in the semester is for less than 12 weeks, where a student takes more than 60 credits in a semester, where a student has illness or external commitments such as employment then the time allocation for academic work becomes seriously stressed. A teaching term of less than 12 weeks would appear to be incompatible with time for learning and reflecting on learning. Teaching periods become one of pressurised rush to complete to deadlines and get on with the next urgent item. Strategies are vital.

Continual Assessment

Where Canadian students seem to win over English students is with the integration of the weekly or bi-weekly test which counts towards the final assessment. By the end of November of semester 1 students on modularised schemes are half way through teaching, half way to examinations and frequently still waiting feedback on their individual progress. Use of early feedback can be highly motivational.

Within modules continual assessment, such as the assessed test at the end of week two, forces students to interact with the material immediately, which is motivating. Many replies commented that the key was involvement with appropriate rewards.

I would not advocate testing as a panacea, it serves to make the student interact with the academic material right from the start. Where tests occur in modules, practicals, laboratories students groan *'because you have to do some work'*, but on balance students prefer it because it *'kicks you into doing something'* *'actually got me to go to the library'*. Regular assessment also allows the teacher to embed directed revision sessions for issues that the class understands less well. (Booth 1994).

At the end of the day the greatest advantage the university has is that most lectures are intrinsically interesting, if taught well can hold a persons attention and imagination for an hour, and at best inspire an individual to read further. In the pressurised nature of current university activity, the time constraints that bear on undergraduates, getting them involved and on board is the key. After that real learning can follow. May be a lecturer does not want the first lecture to be particularly topical and interesting BUT perhaps it needs to be. There can be a good case for not lecturing in the first couple of sessions, but rather setting exercises that force an immediate active interaction with the topic material.

Unsatisfactory progress

Undergraduate tutors commented that failure and expulsion was almost impossible under current university procedures. With the expansion in intake it must be expected that there will be more failures. Quotes include: *'It should be easier to suspend a student'. 'The very rare expulsion has sent salutary ripples round the department'. 'They should be free to fail - and more courage should be shown in facing up to that by staff. We are almost too tolerant for fear we will be seen as bad teacher'. 'Use of the ordinary degree, demotion at the end of year 2 for poor performers, make the honours degree worth getting'. 'Fail and remove students after two warnings. Stop feeling guilty about them, as if we are betraying some code of misguided decency. In tolerating what is often dumb insolence a contempt for the system, we are visibly letting down the other 'working' students, and they know it'.*

Responses from undergraduates who had completed their three years were overwhelmingly in agreement with the above, given that there were appropriate systems to protect the ill and those with genuine personal problems. The comment *'but how did xxxx get a 2.2 after failing so much'*, will be familiar to many tutors. Personally this is topped by the student who asked *'How could you possibly have given me a 2.2, I had worked out a pass at best and expected a fail'*. To which the only answer is that 'examiners move in mysterious ways'.

Electives Issues

Both the staff and student responses indicate that this is mainly a Level 1 issue. Some students use the elective opportunities to make really imaginative module choices. Many select modules with little thought and really enjoy them. From a minority comments: *' I came to do xxxx, why should I waste my time with other subjects' ' Why cannot the department be bothered to teach 120 credits of xxxx at Level 1' 'If we can fail 20 credits why should we take it seriously?' 'If the department doesn't mind what other subjects we take in first year it obviously does not matter what we do or how we do in it.'*

This issue spills over into teaching whereas single honours students are committed and interested elective students are less wholehearted. Staff commented on the *'frustration of teaching mixed ability, mixed back ground and largely unmotivated'* level 1 classes.

It might help if the elective elements of the degree, were more clearly supported and valued by staff. Student comment indicates degree courses are chosen without noticing the 'elective' component. This is followed by the confusion of university registration and choice of electives at that time. Information is available in handbooks but the attention of a student is frequently focused on their primary subject. It might be helpful to:

- Get much more information about electives to students prior to arrival at university and the pressures of registration and
- Show the student that staff value the role of electives by insisting a pass is required for progression. That might serve to raise the learning quality.

It might also go some way to reducing the number of occasions when students say *'I wanted to take xxxx as my elective but the queue was too long / you had to wait another hour / the tutor was busy / module was already full, so I took yyyy.'*

Many academic staff have no real appreciation that, especially in year 1, there is lack of motivation to attend. There is part of the class that is highly motivated, for the rest it is potentially *'a major drag'*.

Time Pressures

Pressures on students

In the semesterised universities examinations come six times in a university career not just at the end of each year or end of year 3. This seems to work both ways. Students are less stressed at the end of year 3, but live with a heightened level of stress through the three years, there are more illness notes to consider.

Students know that being at university is less fun than in the 1960's and 70's. They know that the academic package they receive is different to that of their parents. They know the causes relate to increased numbers and to financial disincentives and *'it's not fair expecting us to survive with no (financial) support'*. They recognise that time for academic work is more constrained.

Student employment

In 1988 a student graduated from Leeds having been employed full time from February. He was given a job offer that was available immediately or not at all. That individual took the job, got his colleagues to cover with note taking, and arranged to use his annual leave to sit his eight final examinations. He explained what he had done at graduation wondering 'if any staff had noticed?' and is extremely happy with his choice. In 1988 that type of experience was rare but not unknown. In the mid 1990's students taking full or part-time employment while pursuing their degree are a more and more common phenomena.

One tutor commented *'Students know that a university degree is not necessarily a passport to employment. The practicalities of finance mean that many students have to take part-time jobs'*. This inevitably takes away some of the feelings of satisfaction with university life. Survey responses acknowledge increasing problems of attendance in classes after 16.00 and in the 12.00 to 14.15 slots. Students were quick to identify that there are lunchtime jobs in take-aways, bars, and covering for regular staff on lunch break. While your evening job may not start until 18.00 if it is on the other side of town you cannot in practice *'afford to attend a class at 16.00 and risk being late for work'*. The scale of student employment is probably seriously underestimated by many academic staff. One engineering tutor asked his Level 2 students to let him know in confidence about their work commitments so classes could be arranged to suit as many as possible. The knowledge that over 70% of the class had jobs and 3 of these exceeded 20 hours a week came as a surprise. A final year student selected her second semester modules so that they were all assessed by coursework. She took a 9-5

secretarial job from February of her final year to try to repay part of her debts and graduated with first class honours. She saw her financial need as out weighing the risk of not getting a First, a 2.1 would do, and strategically planned the module choice in the June of Level 2 when selecting final year options. I see increasing numbers of students selecting optional modules for timetable reasons rather than for academic interest.

These comments accord with the findings of the Barclays Bank Debt Survey (1996). The survey found 32% of students have part-time jobs in term time, slightly more women (36%) than men (27%). Greater numbers of third years are in employment in response to their growing debts.

Both students and staff suggest that academic staff need to recognise that paid employment for students is a fact of modern academic life. Permitting students to sign up for classes rather than assigning them to slots allows the student to optimise university and work commitments. Staff should be sympathetic to difficulties of tutorial classes after 16.00. Time tabling to maximise attendance is likely to increase motivation since one is showing an appreciation of the facts of student life and make teaching more effective.

The short term need to finance current activities leads to hard choices. When the options are either to attend a lecture or to earn money for food and rent most people will choose to earn the money, even though they know it may cost a degree class. *'Yes I know I could get a 2.1 but I owe £5,500 already, I don't have a job for next year so I have to earn some dosh'.* Students are becoming more upfront about this issue *' I explained to Dr xxxx that I wanted to take his module but it is on Mondays from 10-12.00 and I have a job three mornings a week, Monday to Wednesday, that I cannot afford to lose'.* It is not only the evening classes that are vulnerable to these pressures.

Staff need to understand that the majority of a first year class may not be intrinsically interested in the subject material. There is a selling job to do. Even a well motivated student is, like students of the past, trying to accommodate a hangover with the sound of your voice and the lights of the lecture theatre. The cash strapped individual is tired after a night shift or long evening shift at work, if they arrive at a less than first class lecture the experience is not going to be motivating.

At the end of a lecture or practical it is appropriate for staff to ask, 'was that learning experience worth a student running up debts of £7000 that will take him five years or more to repay?

Pressures on Staff

The time involved in chasing defaulters, especially from other departments, and the waste of time when it involves students choosing to fail, was clearly a source of much staff frustration. There is some support for taking a heavy hand with defaulters in semester 1 and having made individuals aware of their own responsibilities to then leave them to respond as independent adults. Certainly staff expressed the views that : *'It is the students responsibility to attend and perform. Students are over 18, if they choose to miss a class that is their problem' 'It*

should not be a tutors job to oversee performance'. 'Methods for tracking and reporting unsatisfactory progress at University level require revision in the light of current student behaviour'.

Undergraduates expressed surprise that I as a tutor might be expected to 'chase them up', although agreed that it was vital support for *'less confident', 'lost', 'half baked', 'completely useless first years'* and those with illness or family problems. There was support from all students interviewed that once someone had decided to 'play the system' then that was their problem. We did not however generate a fool proof methodology for identifying these characters.

There are ever present pressures of Research Assessment exercises, and to place research before teaching, but if you know where your students are 'coming from' maybe you can accommodate to reduce some of their pressures. A number of tutors commented to the effect that '*Academics who are not currently teaching undergraduates cannot really understand the pressures a student is under'.*

Discussion

Motivation is a key part of quality learning (Spaulding 1992). The ideal academic environment would allow academic work to proceed without competing stresses, especially those that compete for time. The reality of student life in 1996 is that a great many elements compete for time and attention. Strategies are evolved by all adults to cope and to optimise activities. The majority of students are balancing the demands of normal life and work and are enjoying their courses and the Universities they are attending. The evidence suggests that the stresses are increasing and in some cases adversely affect academic performance.

Problems with strategic students were recognised in 41% of the departments that responded to the tutor survey with the majority in the old university sector. The evidence suggests we are seeing an increase in students who come to Higher Education without making a positive choice of university or degree subject. (Tables 2 and 3). These individuals are perfectly capable, if motivated, of getting a 2.1 degree but acknowledge having no or limited interest in higher education. H.E. is a necessary part of education on a path to possible employment. Such individuals take a strategic approach to their learning, know what is compulsory, and what can be ignored. Their numbers are small, but with large classes and in student centred sessions they have a demotivating impact on their teachers and colleagues.

Although there may be more enthusiasm for subject material in departments such as Philosophy, Earth Sciences, or Architecture they still have students strategically juggling work, sport and other commitments and some who choose to work at a 2.2 rather than a 2.1 standard. The extent of strategic behaviour is not limited to the lowest end of the results spectrum. Students across the range are using the system to their own advantage, to suit their personal agendas.

These students are not 'duff'. They are behaving as adults pragmatically scheduling to allow for all essential activities. Doing the 'minimum to get by. Perfectly capable of getting 2.1

marks and choosing to get 37/40% at level 1 because that is what is needed. At levels 2 and 3 other pressures lead to reduced assessment performance, although not necessarily to failure.

Students of previous generations did not carry the pressures of a modern student. Learner responsibilities were unheard of. The learning environment is less settled and secure, it is a less supported environment. Staff need to recognise that following expansion of the university system many students are not primarily academic. It is unrealistic to expect all students to be fully committed to all modules.

This is an effect of modularisation, a process designed to maximise flexibility, to encourage education to suit the needs of the diverse and continuously diversifying work force (Marshall and Tucker 1992). It encourage students to identify their own personal needs in relation to their potential employment ambitions. The responses suggests there are few problems with mature students, those returning to education with knowledge of the changing demands of the workplace. Here staff comment on high levels of motivation, a deep approach to learning (Richardson 1994), and a need at times to advise to reduce over-working.

We have a problem accepting that people will fail or perform below their potential in our classes. If someone fails a module it does not mean there is necessarily a problem with the teaching of that class, just that someone has failed it. Most classes are large enough for the sample size to be a normal distribution. If 15% of a class fail a module it does not necessarily mean it is a bad module, it may mean that it is a tough one that requires more effort to do well, so it becomes 'the one to throw'. This module is perhaps more likely to be failed if it occurs in second semester when the security of first semester passes is already established. We should expect a proportion of firsts and fails. It should be a matter for query if no-one fails.

We all know our students are capable of passing our courses if they do the necessary learning, some of them are choosing to 'throw' a module. Pressures are time to earn money, social activities, hobbies, sport, and A LACK OF PRESSURE TO PASS EVERYTHING.

I think that one of the noticeable effects of semesterised examinations is that none of them count enough to wind up an individual to do really well. Revision advice is seen as superfluous. Revision is a matter of a couple of days, *'I only have two exams, so I will do two days for each, maybe three'* not planned over weeks. This is totally different to students where the 'Finals' system still operates.

The 'strategic' student choosing to fail some modules is at one end of a spectrum which ranges from the bright, committed individual who makes particular arrangements to facilitate learning, to those less motivated who are less easy or rewarding to manage.

The principle of least effort is involved here with some students but by no means all. Some are working very hard to balance other interests and make the most of the opportunities for extra-curricula activities that universities uniquely offer. Is it time to more formally recognise that some strategic students are taking part in sport, theatre and journalistic activities for example, as part of well thought out strategies to enhance their career prospects?

Is it time to consider methodologies whereby a student might submit a 'folder of evidence' of non-academic activities at university for potential credit when degree classes are awarded?

We are not, I think, at a point where we wish to charge students for missing classes. Absentee students from the Medical Academy in Daghestan are fined 5,000 roubles (£0.68) per hour missed no matter how good the excuse. (Daily Telegraph 1996).

Issues that I feel the research has highlighted as worthy of further discussion include:

1. Looking at the "accepted failure" conditions in degree programmes. If you can fail 20 credits then a proportion of people will choose to do so. Overall it lowers the standard but it is an entirely understandable human response.
2. Transcripts will make transparent the components of a degree class. A profile dotted with permitted fails is a questionable advertisement for a university. Students from universities where such fails are effectively not permitted are likely to be advantaged in competition for employment.
3. The strategic student choosing to skip academic work is enormously expensive to chase. Can academics avoid this waste of their time? Is there a case for reviewing progress monitoring and discipline procedures?
4. Could more teamwork in Level 1 with group marked work and peer evaluation be used to encourage group interaction and activity? Moves to teamwork reflect real work conditions. If the end of level 1 year grades are significant at the pass-fail border then the problems of collusion are less important than the advantages of motivated learning.
5. The timing of the academic year to give a clear 12 working weeks followed by reading and reflection time before examinations would seems to be just. Semesters that have 12 weeks of teaching, 1 reading week and 1 or 2 weeks of examinations would give a student more opportunity to learn and apply material in examinations. There is a strong argument for eliminating wherever possible the cumbersome University examinations procedures. Where modules have examinations as part of their assessment this should be of 1 hours duration, held in the rooms and at the time the class is normally timetabled. Examination on odd number hours in the first week and even numbered hours the next week. Exceptional modules which demand 2 hour examinations could be accommodated in the 17.00 to 19.00 period.
6. Timing classes to avoid a students part or full time work commitments is clearly impossible. Evidence shows students working through the normal day as well as in the evening and at week-ends. Staff awareness that probably the majority of level 2 and 3 students are holding down jobs should encourage staff flexibility in timetabling option, seminar and tutorial classes.
7. A number of students are genuinely tired after being at work. They do not always have a commitment to a subject and its contents. They have a right to expect lively, stimulating classes, that will counteract the demotivating factors that parallel a university degree course. They will possibly be £7000 in debt by the end of a degree. The learning experience needs to be worth it. Academic staff need to be aware of competing activities.
8. There is a case for exploring giving credit for non-curricula activity which is part of a well thought through preparation for employment.

Acknowledgements

Thanks are due to the 53 staff in other departments and universities that responded to the original questionnaire. More than 25 students tolerated my asking questions and were encouragingly pleased to assist.

Discussions at the SEDA 'Developing Students, Developing Staff: Supporting Staff in a Changing Environment' conference in Sunderland, 1995, and at the 'Motivation Conundrum' conference in Preston, 1996, gave much helpful feedback and ideas.

Comments from Leeds University staff on the Learning Skills Development Group, in the Teaching and Learning Support Unit, and those who attended the Geography seminar in May 1996 were also very helpful.

Many thanks to all the Leeds geography undergraduates that make me very aware of the realities of undergraduate life.

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