

Learning Orientations and Study Contracts

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Introduction

Students join higher education with different aims. For some there is a wish to continue their study of a particular subject, while for others their main concern is to progress towards a chosen career. For many students, however, their own reasons for joining the university are affected by outside pressures from, for example, family, school or employment. Then, students must discover what it is possible to gain from the experience of higher education and how to study in order to achieve their own, individual goals.

This chapter describes the differences in students' *orientation to learning* which affect their study patterns and strongly influence their experience of learning. The interviews on which this research is based, carried out with Open University students and in Surrey University, showed that students develop more or less explicit strategies to work in particular ways in order to gain maximum value from the experience. This does not mean that they work equally hard however, and the focus of their effort will be on different aspects of the experience. It is also clear from studies described in earlier chapters that students differ in their sophistication as learners. For some, therefore, greater effort does not yield a better outcome of learning. In understanding student learning, we need to look at the interaction between orientation, approach, and conceptions. We also need to consider how far students develop and change during their period in higher education.

To highlight students' overall experience of learning or their perceptions of gains from study, consider the following replies to the question – "What have you learnt from the course?". The quotations from six students, who had just completed a foundation course in Social Science at the Open University, show that it is possible to gain very many different kinds of things from the same course (Taylor *et al.*, 1982).

I've learnt about the different disciplines and about the way the society's changed over the centuries since the industrial revolution and how this has changed everything.

. . . well basically an insight into methods of looking at different things. I mean, it was so broad, it has set things in perspective and so it's a good introduction to different facets of the subject. The way different disciplines will look at something, different attitudes of the sociologist and the more specific examination of an individual that a psychologist would make.

I've learnt, I think, this business of being sceptical is quite a big thing. Questioning things a lot more. I think probably to live in the future, if I don't

carry on with Social Sciences that's probably the most valuable thing that I feel that I personally got from the course. When I read a newspaper or watch television or something I find that I am a lot more questioning than I used to be.

I think the biggest thing is the confidence – that perhaps I am not as stupid as I thought I was.

I suppose I'd have missed a lot of what I've learnt in relation to my work about the psychology of work and that kind of thing and perhaps thinking about things a bit deeper. Whereas I was inclined to take decisions fairly quickly on certain things, now I do have certain experience having studied a bit of psychology and sociology in places and I do try and perhaps see how things are going to interrelate and affect people – spend a bit more time on it and be a bit more thoughtful than I was before.

I think it's given me different ideas as to how I'll approach my course next year. I will take notes which I didn't do this year – I didn't know really what to do and what not to do this year. So I'll do quite a lot of things differently. I think I'll just approach the whole learning bit, if you like, differently next time. And what else have I learnt? – I suppose on a personal level I've learnt to use my time effectively.

Besides gaining an understanding of the course content, which may be the teacher's main aim, students mention the personal and affective aspects of study; gaining in confidence, changing in attitudes, and increasing critical awareness and scepticism. As teachers and researchers, we may be too ready to accept students' assessment grades and their understanding of the course content as the sole measure of success. It is clear from these quotations, however, that from the students' point of view other aspects can be equally important.

In higher education in recent years there has been a focus on transferable skills for future employment. The kind of higher education most useful to future employers has become an area of intense debate and courses have increasingly included more emphasis on transferable skills. In Britain, the Enterprise in Higher Education programme has been successful in supporting this movement (Elton, 1994). In describing the learner's orientation to education, we must take account of both institutional and personal contexts for study. What are the formal demands of the assessment system? What sort of understandings are valued and rewarded by the formal curriculum? What are students' aims and purposes in engaging in a course of study?

The Social Context of Learning*The institutional context*

In previous chapters the outcome of learning has been described as a change in conception of some concept, issue, or aspect of the world. The quotations above show the diversity of these changes, while subsequent chapters will indicate the ways in which the institutional context and the learning environment influence the outcomes of learning.

A similar interpretation of the effects of assessment was provided by Becker, Geer and Hughes (1968). In *Making the Grade*, they show how the “grade-point average perspective” pervaded the entire course experience for students and provided the background for their study. The grade-point average perspective involved a “definition of the situation” by students who identified grades as the most important force leading their actions. Students felt that getting good grades defined success and that gaining these grades was of primary importance for their college career.

There’s an awful lot of work being done up here for the wrong reason. I don’t exactly know how to put it, but people are going through here and not learning anything at all... There’s a terrific pressure on everybody here to get good grades... There are a lot of courses where you can learn what’s necessary to get the grade and when you come out of the class you don’t know anything at all. You haven’t learned a damn thing, really. In fact, if you try to really learn something, it would handicap you as far as getting a grade goes.

The conflict between “getting the grade” and “really learning something” can be seen as an unintended side-effect of the assessment system. The pervasive influence of assessment defined the institutional context for studying – the grade-point average became the “Camp currency”.

At a more general level, the interaction of the education institution and the students can lead to particular sub-cultures. Clark and Trow (1966) described this interaction as follows:

Two broad sets of factors shape the nature of the orientations and relationships of students in college. The first set flows from the character of the larger society. Students come to college with certain resources — material, moral, intellectual, emotional and cultural. These resources are largely determined by the life experiences the students have had, and these in turn are shaped by the status they and their parents have held in the larger society. The prior social locations and experiences also shape aspiration: the kinds of lives the students envisage for themselves in a rapidly changing society. The second set of determinants derives from the nature of the colleges themselves; their historical development, their value climates, their structural features, and the shaping environment thus provided for student life. A college is not simply an aggregation of students, it also has qualities and characteristics which are to some extent independent of the people who fill its halls and offices at any given moment.

In our terms, Clark and Trow were showing how distinctive sub-cultures emerged from the differing experiences of institutional and personal contexts of learning with four main analytical categories used to describe these sub-cultures. They are not describing types of student, as a student may well participate in several sub-cultures, and the actual sub-cultures that exist may well combine aspects of more than one type. Rather the typology can be seen as “a heuristic device for getting at the processes by which social structures shape student styles of life in different kinds of colleges”. The four main sub-cultures were labelled collegiate, vocational, academic and non-conformist within the framework shown in Table 5.1.

The collegiate culture is the stereotype of college life, a world of sport and campus fun – some gesture is made to studying, but only in terms of the minimum requirements to gain a degree. The vocational culture is focused on getting a qualification and gaining employment; here the engagement in ideas and scholarship may be seen as a distraction, equivalent to sport and social activities. The academic culture, present on every campus, is the sub-culture of serious intellectual effort applied to the world of knowledge and ideas. Students pursue knowledge and understanding. Their symbols of the institution are the library, the seminar group and teaching staff with the same inclinations. The non-conformist culture differs from other cultures in its detachment from the college. Students are involved with ideas and learning but their points of reference are off-campus groups. There exists in this distinctive student style a somewhat aggressive non-conformist and critical detachment from the college. Clark and Trow summarised this typology of sub-cultures in terms of two main dimensions – the degree to which students are involved with ideas and the extent to which students identify with the college or institution.

TABLE 5.1
Types of Orientations of the Four Most Distinguishable Student Subcultures
(from Clark and Trow, 1966)

		<i>Involvement with Ideas</i>	
		much	little
<i>Identification with College</i>	much	ACADEMIC	COLLEGIATE
	little	NON-CONFORMIST	VOCATIONAL

Clark and Trow use the term ‘orientations’ to mean the “defining elements of student sub-cultures in which they appear as shared notions constitutes right attitude and action towards the range of issues and experiences confronted in college”. This general use of orientation is rather different from what has been defined in this chapter as a student’s *learning orientation*; the aims, values and purposes for study – the personal context of study.

The personal context

How do students come to be taking a particular course? What are the aims and purposes in undertaking a course of study? With adult students these questions are particularly important because of the voluntary nature of the education they are engaged in.

The concept of motivation has been used to explain variations in students’ capabilities for studying. However, there are problems with the use of this concept. Firstly, it has been used in so many different ways, there is a lack of precise

definition with regard to its meaning (Peters, 1958; Parlett, 1980). Secondly, it has been used as an explanation of behaviour, which may not take enough account of the conscious control learners have over how and what they study. Motivation is seen as a drive, students are viewed as being driven by factors out of their control. Similarly, some goal direction theories tend to view students as responding to stimuli, rather than actively constructing their own behaviour patterns. The foci of traditional studies are the motivational factors which push and pull students towards particular goals, for example, to pass an examination.

Such ideas about motivation are based on theories derived from other contexts which have been imposed on student learning without sufficient consideration of their ecological validity. Subsequent work on motivation, in relation to study processes (e.g. Biggs, 1978), has, however, developed constructs more closely associated with the study situation and students' intentions. The description of personal context for study or learning orientation develops this work further, to provide a more holistic description of students' motives and purposes.

Learning orientation is defined by "all those attitudes and aims which express the student's individual relationship with a course of study and the university", (Taylor *et al.*, 1981). It is the collection of purposes which form the personal context for the individual student's learning. The idea of an orientation assumes that students have an active relationship with their studying. From the point of view of learning orientation, success and failure is judged in terms of the extent to which students fulfil their own aims. Orientation does not assume any state or trait belonging to the student; it is a quality of the relationship between the student and the course rather than a quality inherent in the student, and so may change over time. The analysis of learning orientation, therefore, does not set out to type students, rather it sets out to identify and describe types of orientation and to show the implications of different types of orientation for the approach a student takes to learning.

Orientations to Learning

An interview study of students' orientations to learning at Surrey University (Taylor, 1983) identified four distinct types of orientation. These were *academic orientation*, where the student's goals involved the academic side of university life; *vocational orientation*, where the student's goal was to get a job after university; *personal orientation* where the student's goals were concerned with their personal development; and *social orientation* where the student's goals focused on the social side of the university life. The first three of these orientations could be divided into two sub-types according to whether the student was directly interested in the content of the course or whether they were studying the course more as a means to an end. These sub-types distinguished in each case between intrinsic and extrinsic interest in the course. Taylor found that the concerns that students had while studying at university were intimately connected to the type of orientation they had, and that these orientations and their concerns helped to make sense of the amount of effort the student put into different aspects of the course and university life (see Table 5.2).

A further study at the Open University (Taylor *et al.*, 1981) found all these categories, with the exception of the social orientation, among students taking the Social Science Foundation Course, *Making Sense of Society*.

TABLE 5.2
Student's learning orientations

<i>Orientation</i>	<i>Interest</i>	<i>Aim</i>	<i>Concerns</i>
Vocational	Intrinsic	Training	Relevance of course to future career
	Extrinsic	Qualification	Recognition of qualification's worth
Academic	Intrinsic	Intellectual interest	Choosing stimulating lectures
	Extrinsic	Educational progression	Grades and academic progress
Personal	Intrinsic	Broadening or self-improvement	Challenging, interesting material
	Extrinsic	Compensation or proof of capability	Feedback and passing the course
Social	Extrinsic	Having a good time	Facilities for sport and social activities

The Complexity of the Learner's Orientation

It is important to recognise that the categories and sub-categories used to describe orientations are simply an analytic framework and not descriptions of the types of student found in the sample. In fact, any particular student's orientation will usually be a complex mix of two or more of these orientational types. For example, many of the Open University students could clearly be seen to have mainly a personal orientation to learning, but many of them also showed evidence of vocational or academic orientations. To illustrate these joint orientations, and the complexity of individual students' orientations, here is an example of a student who, while primarily personally oriented, shows aspects of a vocational orientation.

Well I hope to stop myself from turning into a complete cabbage – and to widen my views on life and the problems – eventually I hope to get a degree and possibly that will help me to get a job one day which I would like to do. But I think that is very much a secondary consideration.

This quote shows clearly the primary personal aims, and the secondary vocational aims, of this student. We can expect that both these aims will affect the

student's approach to the course and a detailed description of the orientation, including the relative strength of these aims, should help us to understand the particular student's approaches to studying.

Similarly, where a student shows signs of having both personal and academic orientations, both aspects will affect the student's relationship with the course. A student who is personally oriented, but also academically oriented, might be interested in personal development, but more in terms of the ideas to be explored in the subject than in becoming more capable in a general way.

I am interested in man, in society and I realise how narrow a view I have about the way society works, about what other people feel and do and why they do these things. I got a bit from doing the A-level last year and I hope that I get an awful lot more from doing the Social Science Foundation Course this year.

In this quote one cannot distinguish clearly between the two orientations – they seem to mingle together as one orientation in terms of the student's own experience. However, the separation produced by the use of these *analytic* categories of orientation helps to unravel a student's particular orientation and to see the implications for approaches to studying. Further examples from the interview transcripts help to elaborate these categories of educational orientation.

Academic orientation – intrinsic Intellectual interest in the discipline

This category of orientation is characterised by students who are primarily interested in studying a particular subject 'for its own sake'. They are intellectually interested in the subject and are interested in studying at a higher level. Most students with this orientation already had some experience of the subject before coming to university and so tended to be 'syllabus free'. They want to follow up aspects of the subject beyond the defined syllabus. One student at Surrey University had taken this to an extreme.

I wanted to do sociology . . . the interesting thing about sociology is that a part of it is called the sociology of education and in studying education I had become more aware of it in a more objective way. You start to see the place it has in society. You see sociology isn't a nine to five study, it's a continual thing in your social life — you are being a sociologist ... You are assessed so you've got to do a certain amount of course work... I copy as many essays as I can and do that minimum amount of work in psychology and philosophy. In sociology I just try and do as much reading as I can and then when I write essays I always bring in much more. But I hardly ever answer the question; I am always much too concerned with other things of interest to me.

So, the main concern of these students with a dominant intellectual interest in the subject is to be allowed to follow their own intellectual interests. In the interview, these students often mentioned particular lectures which had fired their enthusiasm for parts of the course and they particularly appreciated parts of the course which allowed them freedom to choose their own topic, for example, project

work in the third year. They tended to criticise parts of the course where this sort of choice was restricted.

Academic Orientation — extrinsic

Educational progression

In this category students are primarily interested in *progression* through the educational system. They tend to have chosen the course because they had been successful in the subject at school, rather than study from an intellectual interest in the subject; that was thought of as 'the next step'.

I wanted to do something and I've done evening classes, but it wasn't really enough. I don't know, I've got through that sort of stage.

Well basically I am studying it because I did three 'A' levels and one of them was sociology. English doesn't seem too good really unless you want to teach and economics – well I find the maths difficult... I suppose most of my work is for assessment. I do tend to try to work – to do my best as I can in essays because they're assessed. If you try to work hard you'll get a good mark then you haven't got much pressure when it comes to the exams.

Within this category, students are interested primarily in passing the courses and getting the degree. They tend to be competitive and to lay great stress on getting good grades. In contrast to the intrinsically interested academic students, they tend to be 'syllabus bound' and in some ways may be described as 'model' students, in that their essays were always in on time, and they work evenly over all the subjects in the syllabus. The students with this orientation prefer to have clear guidelines as to what is required for assessments and to criticise parts of the course where there is little guidance.

Vocational orientation — intrinsic

Good training

One of the courses studied at Surrey University was a degree in Hotel and Catering Administration and, as one might expect, many of the students who were studying the course were vocationally oriented. There was, however, a profound difference in concerns of students according to whether their aim was to get a *qualification* in order to get a job in the industry or whether their aim was to be *trained* as hotel managers. The latter were intrinsically interested in the course and were critical of any parts of it that they thought were irrelevant to their future careers. They tended to place emphasis on the practical side of the course and to like the industrial year best of all. Since their interest was in becoming trained, students with this orientation tended to work hard on the course while they could see its relevance to their chosen career.

At the Open University students are sometimes thinking not of a future career but of a current one:

It appealed to me because the reaction of people is terribly important and it is not just seeing the reaction — I want to know the reason people react under various kinds of circumstances. So far, all I have is observations you know; experiences. It's important because I hope it will help me to

understand people more. But I am not going to use the qualification at the end of the day so that side of it is not important to me.

As we see here, this category is characterised by vocational concerns and an intrinsic interest in the course.

Vocational orientation — extrinsic

Qualification

I'm in for a third (class degree) at the moment. I think I'm better than a third but I'm not that bothered – I don't think our degree is recognised that much by industry. So you could say that it is not that important. As long as I'm getting a pass mark or reasonably above, then good – I'm not going to go all out to do the best I can. I go out to get a reasonable mark.

The orientation a student has helps to explain the differential effort put into studying by different students. The above student, for example, did little beyond the minimum requirements of the assessment system. The amount of effort he was willing to make is understandable, given his aim of getting a degree in order to get a particular kind of job, and his belief that the grade of degree would not matter.

For the Open University students with this orientation there was sometimes the fear that an employer would not recognise the worth of their degree and this caused some anxiety. However, the expectation of many of them was that the degree would help them in promotion.

To get into this apex (top of the hierarchy) is going to be quite hard ... okay I've got two sets of professional qualifications but need this one to go with it. Because in a lot of people's eyes, particularly management trainers and development people, a degree is everything — it proves you've done something — you've trained yourself to think and express yourself clearly.

For this student, the choice of degree subjects was only important because the employer had to be able to see the relevance of these courses to the job. However, for those students who were hoping that the degree would qualify them to start a new career, the choice of course was less important and often a hit or miss affair. This was in contrast to those who were intrinsically interested in the training aspect of taking a course; then its relevance became crucially important to them personally.

For some of the Open University students, the degree course was seen as a way of ensuring that they could get a job sometime in the future. This was particularly so for women with young children.

I've got nothing behind me absolutely nothing. No qualifications — I've only had odd jobs before. As soon as the child is old enough, I'll have to get a job. Somebody said, "the O.U... that's your best bet". It's an education basis; something behind me. You know, if I go for a job now I haven't got a chance, no way. And I know nothing except factory work and that's not what I want. I'm not all that bright but I'm not thick either. So I want something so I can go and get a decent job.

Personal orientation — intrinsic

Broadening

This category is characterised by students who are personally oriented and interested in being tested or improving themselves as individuals. The intrinsically interested student is concerned more with the *broadening* effect of education and is using university study as a means of changing. In some ways, the university is seen as a sort of finishing school, a place where new ideas and challenges can be used for self-improvement and to improve the ability to cope with life.

Its a broad course, and I think it is an excellent course for someone like me who wants enrichment of life having missed the opportunity earlier in life.

In the course, and in all the other aspects of university life, these students look for stimulation and challenge. They are concerned with the content of the course, only insofar as they can see its usefulness as a vehicle for change and personal development.

The topics I like I will and sit and read for ever – if I think it will be useful to me then I'll do more but some things aren't that useful.

This personal orientation is very common among Open University students and among mature students at Surrey University. For these students the incentive to join the university often comes from a feeling of frustration with their life.

I hadn't thought about that at all but I felt that I had to do something. I thought I was going to go round the bend being at home and I wasn't raring to go to get a job. I like looking after the house and the baby and that sort of thing, but somehow I wanted to do something else.

I suppose it was waking up one morning and finding I'm 35, sort of male menopause. I can't sit around here watching T.V. for the rest of my life – let's do something.

The importance of this course to these students concerned how it might change them as people, making them more able to cope with life and making them more interesting people. They saw their study as purely of personal significance.

It is important to me because it is the only thing that is me, and that only I am doing. It doesn't matter to anyone else results wise, how you get on, and I think it is purely you doing it and you getting something out of it for yourself.

Again, the choice of course was almost irrelevant and was likely to be chosen by means of elimination of the alternatives, rather than by positive choice. These students hoped that the social science course would help their understanding of everyday life. The broadening aim was summed up in their response to the question about their expectations of the course and what they wanted to gain from it.

Well I expect a better insight into the way other people (are). I think one tends to be very biased; you live your life and that is the way it is. I'm hoping that I'll be able to see things from different points of view and not to be too

single minded about things. I hope at the end I'll be able to converse with people more easily without getting nervous.

Being at home it is easy just to go to coffee mornings and just to watch play school which are all right in themselves but it is not the end. I would hate to think of myself doing that this year, next year and the next year afterwards. And also I would like to think that it might make me more interesting really – I want to feel that I've had an exciting day and I've learnt something today or read something today and so hopefully enrich me as a person.

Personal orientation — extrinsic

Compensation

Extrinsic personal orientation is seen most clearly where students are doing the course to test their own capability. They want to find out if they are capable of a degree and if so, to what level. These students are more concerned with grades and feedback than with the content of the course. This orientation again is prevalent among Open University students. It can be seen as a sort of *compensation* for the lack of further education in the past. Students' reasons for joining the university for this orientation are to do with a feeling that they have been deprived of opportunities in the past or incorrectly judged by the education system. Through Open University study they hope to prove to themselves and to other people that they are capable of higher education.

It's something I've always wanted to do. For personal reasons between me and my parents I didn't go to university when I should have done. I've had a hankering ever since to discover whether or not I could have done it.

I suppose I want to prove something to myself. The one piece I have read said it was the most difficult way anybody had yet devised to get a degree and I thought — well, if I can do it at least it will prove something to me if to nobody else, and I'd like to.

Almost as soon as they start the course it becomes important to these students to succeed in passing the course, or at least in studying the course.

It is important, yes, now I've started it is going to be quite important. I feel that I don't suppose I had a challenge, not ever probably, not for me to have to do it myself, so it is important. I have to prove, perhaps to myself that I can stick to it and do it. It is important, but just to me.

I'd say fairly important. I feel it's going to be the only chance I've got to do this and if I drop out of it I won't get another chance, not in the foreseeable future and by then it will be too late.

Personal satisfaction, It won't help me with my job, I don't intend to go marching off in six or seven years time clutching my B.A. and demanding a super job somewhere. I just want to do it to see what happens.

Social orientation

Having a good time

This category is characterised by students who appear to have social aims which influence the way they go about working:

Put it this way, I would have gone to university anyway — it was irrelevant which course.

The outside activities that I do — (radio, film unit, and sport) are very important. There is a lot to do outside and in some respects I tend to put off work because of them. If there's something to be done, I'd rather do that than something else. Then I try to keep it balanced — from the point of view of university education. This side of it is just as important as the academic side, if not more important, I suppose because you can always study in a correspondence course or something like that, but you can't get this kind of social thing and development anywhere else.

Social orientation appears to be extrinsic almost by definition; as it cannot be related to the course itself. But students often have aspects of vocational or academic orientations as well. Social orientation seems to affect the decisions students make about how to spend their time and may mean that the course is allocated a certain percentage of the available time and social activities the remainder.

Very few Open University students show this type of orientation, almost certainly due to the nature of the teaching, which is mainly by course materials sent through the post. However, some students place a high priority on tutorials because these provide an opportunity to meet people. The university life at a conventional university does, in contrast to this, provide numerous social activities, and at Surrey some students appeared to have these things in mind when they decided to apply to university.

Study Contracts

If we look at what students say that they gain from university study, we can see a mirror image of orientation type. The quotations below, for example, show an extrinsic personal orientation at the beginning of the year and a perception of gain at the end of the year which is a direct match.

At the beginning of the year, one student said:

I didn't do much at school – I got to my mid twenties and I started to think – perhaps you're not as stupid as you thought. I have to prove to myself that I can stick to it and do it.

At the end of the first year of study, a comment was:

I think the biggest thing is the confidence and perhaps I'm not as stupid as I thought I was, well perhaps I didn't think I was stupid anyway. But I can do a foundation course so we'll see what happens from there.

This second example shows a match between an intrinsic vocational orientation and the perception of gain at the end of the year. Again comparing first and final years, we find comments like:

I think I chose the social science course possibly because the sociology is more related to day-to-day environment – things that I do. I cover Personnel at work so it seemed to be a useful vehicle. I wanted a broader knowledge of the basic things I'm doing on a daily basis.

If I hadn't done the course I would have probably missed a lot of what I have learnt in relation to my job in dealing with people – the psychology of work and that kind of thing. I was inclined to take decisions quickly and now I do have certain experience in psychology and sociology, in certain cases I do try and perhaps work out how things are going to interrelate to people – perhaps more thoughtful than I was before.

In the study of orientations (Taylor, 1983), the longitudinal data also showed that there was a logical consistency between students' orientations and their reported study patterns over time, including the efforts they expended on different aspects of the course. For example, one of the students with an academic, *intrinsic* orientation already mentioned, said:

My attitude is both instrumental and interest, really, because you are assessed and so you've got to do a certain amount of course work and, eh, I copy as many essays as I can and do the minimum amount of work in Philosophy and Psychology. And in Sociology, I just try to do as much reading as I can, and then when I do write essays I always bring in much more, but I hardly ever answer the question. I'm always much more concerned with the things that are of interest to me.

Although this student, not surprisingly, did not get good marks, he nevertheless could describe a coherent rationale for his study behaviour. This shows a remarkable contrast in strategy with the following quotation from a student who has an academic *extrinsic* orientation

All the work I do is geared for the assessment. It seems to me you could do a lot of background reading but I don't think it's really necessary. I mean, if I was particularly interested in something I would, but I'm not the sort of person who reads round a lot. You don't have to do an awful lot of reading to do quite well. I do what is necessary for the assignments and that's all the work I do really.

The use of the term *study contract* describes this relationship between the students' orientations and the way that they go about working and studying on the course. One student says to herself, "If I want to get a 2i and get onto that professional qualification course, I am going to have to put a lot of effort into the course particularly on assessments". While another student says to himself, "Well, getting the degree guarantees me a suitable job, so I will concentrate my efforts on those parts of the course which will provide me with the best training programme".

By study contract we do not mean the type of learning contract which some courses use to negotiate the specific learning objectives students will pursue within a course. Rather this contract is internally negotiated by the students with themselves. It becomes visible in an interview through descriptions of concerns and study patterns. Students vary in their awareness of the strategy they are

using. While some students have a way of describing their approach in strategic terms others describe what they are doing without, themselves, making conscious links between their aims and their studying. The links nevertheless are implied by the relationship which is visible in the longitudinal data and which shows the consistency of their concerns over time.

The situational context of a student's aspirations and the opportunities offered by the course are part of the calculation students make about how to expend their efforts. Of course, students do not always live up to their own good intentions and they are not always so logical in their choices. There are, however, clear indications of long term planning and internal negotiation. It is the students' own ambitions and interests, and their knowledge of themselves, which show us that this internal contract is being made. The effectiveness of this contract depends on good information. The students can only work on the basis of that knowledge:

I'm aiming for an upper second because if I want to go on to a postgraduate course I will need an upper second for either Vocational Guidance or Educational Psychology. And really, the higher (class) you get for the job the better, really being realistic. If there's a shortage of jobs they are going to take the one with the highest degree. *(Vocational extrinsic)*

Whether or not this analysis is correct, the student's beliefs and orientation help to form a study contract which involves working consistently hard with a strong assessment focus. For such students, changes in the assessment system crucially affect their study contract and they may need to change their study patterns to take this into account – they may need to work more or less hard. The above student with this orientation in a highly competitive job market had to work much harder than the student quoted below who, although he shared the same extrinsic vocational orientation, had calculated that he needed only to coast along to his degree:

Most of my work is to get marks. It shouldn't be that way, but it is. I do some background reading, but it is still for assessment. I'm in for a third at the moment. I think I'm better than a third, but I'm not all that bothered, because I don't think our degree is recognised much by industry anyway, and so you could say that it is not that important. As long as I'm getting a pass mark, or reasonably above, that's good. I'm not the sort of person to go all out to do the best that I can. I go out to get a reasonable mark.

This analysis re-emphasises the strategic approach many students take and shows why some students need to take this approach while others do not. The study contract is affected most by changed circumstances which cannot be anticipated by the student. Particular points of re-negotiation occur at times such as after a sandwich placement or after examination results. It would be foolish, perhaps, for students to continue working for really good class of degree when their continuous assessment results mean that it is out of their reach. The longitudinal research shows students making calculations and formulating strategies which are much more subtle than simply working hard or less hard.

The effort and what it is expended on depends on what particular blend of outcome the student wants – i.e. on their orientation alongside their knowledge of how easy or difficult it will be for them to get what they want.

The concept of study contract does, however, capture the differing and changing attitudes which students show in the interviews towards the outcomes of their university studies. It shows that for any outcome there is a payment in terms of effort, and that some students may not have to ‘pay’ as much as others. It also shows that an understanding of differing approaches to learning depends on seeing not only their individual learning orientation, but also their perspective and knowledge about the external context of the course. This concept demonstrates the need to value individual students in a more holistic way and to provide students with accurate information about all aspects of a course. It also points to the importance of the students’ awareness of the impact of their decisions on their future. Otherwise, many students will make their study contract on the basis of poor information both about the course and about the consequences of their choices.

Conclusion

We have established that a *learning orientation* provides a useful construct for understanding a student’s personal context for study. It encapsulates the complex nature of a student’s aims, attitudes, purposes for studying. Moreover, learning orientation is not an invariable property ascribed to a student. It describes the relationship between the individual and both the course of study, the institution and indeed the world beyond the university. It can also change and develop over time. Learning orientation is an important construct as it contributes to our understanding of what students learn. Besides the qualitative differences in learning outcomes described by Dahlgren (Chapter 2), which focus on the variations in how students understand specific concepts, students’ overall perceptions of gains from studying can be understood in relation to orientation. Students’ perceptions of gains from study, illustrated in the opening quotations to this chapter, can be related, logically and empirically, to their learning orientations. The powerful influences of the student’s idiosyncratic purposes in studying, and of the student’s perceptions of the learning context within the institution, are already clear.

Many lecturers seem unaware of the very different orientations held by their students, and as we saw in Chapter 1, tend to blame students for laziness (or lack of motivation). They thus assume that there is a single reason for being at university or college – to obtain the highest level of qualification. No doubt that was the lecturers’ orientation: they almost inevitably had, or developed, a strong academic orientation.

The research described in this chapter serves as a strong reminder that most students have a complex mixture of reasons for continuing their education, and few of them aspire to the pinnacle of academic achievement towards which lecturers seem to believe they should be striving. Students study in a strategic way to maximise their achievement but within their own definition of what achievement means.