

Editorial

In this issue of *Learning and Teaching: The International Journal of Higher Education in the Social Sciences*, academics from Sweden, the United States, Australia and the United Kingdom offer insights into a number of features of undergraduate study – independent study projects, the development of political attitudes, the graduate attributes agenda, general education courses in global studies and the attainment gap between students with different types of entry qualifications.

In the first article, Maria Zackariasson explores the emotional responses of undergraduates undertaking independent projects in two Swedish universities. She distinguishes between feelings experienced when thinking about the future (anticipatory emotions) and expectations about future feelings (anticipated emotions). Analysis of recorded supervision sessions and focus group discussions revealed that the responsibility to act independently in the design and execution of their project was stressful for many students and they welcomed explicit direction from their supervisors. The emotions students expressed in the supervision meetings were mainly worries about whether they had made sufficient progress and what remained to be done. As well as responding to these anticipatory feelings, supervisors often talked about the feelings that students might expect to have in the future and used these anticipated emotions to encourage students to act in ways that minimised future stress and anxiety. While this approach could be interpreted as over-directive, it can also strengthen the ability of students to act autonomously.

In the second article, Hailey Huckestein, Steven Mikulic and Jeffrey Bernstein investigate whether undergraduates from different disciplines differ in their approaches to politics. They conducted a survey of more than six hundred students, asking them about their political affiliation, political knowledge and the sources of their information about current political events. Respondents were then asked to evaluate potential campaign slogans that political science students had developed in a simulation exercise on a course about campaigns and elections. While acknowledging that pre-existing political attitudes and interests could have influenced students' choice of college major, the authors expected that the epistemology of their disciplines would shape their response to political stimuli, and differences between students would increase over time. They found that third- and fourth-year students





in all subjects but Health were more likely to feel qualified to participate in politics than first- and second-year students, and this trend was more pronounced in students who closely identified with their discipline. Differences in responses to political stimuli were identified, with students from political science and science, technology, engineering and mathematics looking for reliable factual material about election candidates, while humanities and business students concentrated on the effective use of language to convey political messages.

In the third article, Peta Cook examines the 'graduate attributes' agenda in Australia and identifies problems with its conceptualisation and implementation. The widespread adoption by universities of statements about the set of skills and qualities that their graduates will be able to demonstrate is closely aligned with an emphasis on preparing students for the labour market and an associated neglect of the broader purposes of higher education. Academic staff are expected to embed these attributes in programmes of study, often without the necessary resources to do so. Their job is made harder by a lack of clarity about whether these attributes are above and beyond disciplines or capable of being fostered across all disciplines. The institutional promotion of generic graduate attributes also runs the risk of characterising students as a homogenous group. In particular, culturally specific attributes are likely to offer little benefit to international students.

In the fourth article, Carol Miller reports on the impact of a global studies course on students' understanding of international trade and migration. At the beginning of this general education course, over 40 per cent of students did not know what the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) was and the proportion was even higher among students who did not access TV or radio news. When surveyed towards the end of the course, many of these students showed that they had developed a clear understanding of NAFTA and were able to evaluate its effects. Their written reflections on their learning indicated that they were making links between their academic knowledge of the topic and their roles as voters and as citizens of an interdependent world. The next time the course ran, the author augmented the readings, discussions and assignments with weekly quizzes based on press coverage of current events. It remains to be seen if making the regular reading of newspapers a course requirement reduces the proportion of students using social media as their main source of news.

In the fifth article, Richard Peake analyses aspects of the attainment gap between undergraduates admitted to a Criminal Justice and Criminology



degree at a high-status English university on the basis of their academic qualifications (A-levels) and those recruited with vocational qualifications from the Business and Technology Education Council (BTEC). In the five-year period studied, 90 per cent of students with A-levels gained first-class and upper second-class degrees, while less than 50 per cent of students with BTECs achieved these awards. While both the academic and the vocational routes are considered equivalent for entry to higher education, A-level assessment methods differ significantly from those on BTEC programmes, and the former are more closely aligned with the types of assignment set on degree courses. The author recommends that universities ease the transition from BTEC study to degree-level study by more effective pre-entry programmes, more use of mentors and personal tutors and the provision of academic skills training, particularly in academic essay writing and referencing.

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Penny Welch and Susan Wright