

# The 3D University – Project Summary

## Introduction

This project has been about trying to better understand students' experiences of university by continuing to ask some of the older questions – like how social background is important – and adding new ones around the university's culture and campus. Both research and common sense tell us that your time as a student will vary depending on who you are and things like the location, type, and size of your university. These were all important in this study, and 'Russell' University's status as a British 'red brick' institution – large, relatively old, of high national and international status, research-oriented, and disciplinarily diverse – influences and binds together the three strands of this research: the organization, the social, and the geographical.

## Organisation

Russell's strong research focus does not mean that pedagogy is neglected per se, but it was clear to the participants in this study that teaching was not academics'/the university's primary focus. Its broad disciplinary base also ensures a variety of educational and philosophical (as well as political) orientations. The university's status attracts staff and students from all over the world, and the scale of the institution involves a cast of tens of thousands. In combination, this creates – as we'd expect – an enormous diversity of interests and identities, which essentially constitutes sets of intersecting subcultures. Alongside the research-intensity, we can also see the hallmarks of the UK's highly marketized university system in the heavy (over-) recruitment of lucrative international students and the cost-effective, labour-efficient reliance on lecture-based teaching. The late 2019/early 2020 strikes, too, are symptomatic of this side of UK higher education and indicated to the students a sense that the university management cared little for staff – or students.

## Social Composition

Socially, as a prestigious, selective institution, Russell attracts high attaining domestic students, as well as a significant proportion of international ones. This, with the broad disciplinary profile of the university and its size, ensures the maintenance of a pronounced social diversity. Things such as fashion, tastes, extra-curricular interests, accent, gender, and sexual orientation, were seen as unproblematic and a welcome reflection of social variety. At the same time, though, the student population was perceived to be diverse in limited ways, with Black and working class students largely absent. There were also evident divides and sometimes strained relations across dimensions such as social class and/or wealth, age, personal politics, race, and language. Academics were seen as mostly white British or European, and politically left-leaning – teaching assistants who led smaller group teaching were more diverse – but the content was described as inclusive and varied rather than Eurocentric. Some aspects of university life, usually small group activities (e.g. student societies, accommodation, sports, and seminars) could, but didn't always, allow students to cross social divides and enable closer interaction between staff and students.

## Geography

Russell's campus is very large; it needs to be to host the sheer volume of people and pursuits, from teaching, studying, and research, to living, socialising, eating, shopping, sports, social activism, mental health support, and entertainment. There are very few other organisations which encompass this range of activities. The university's development and history, too, to some extent can be read through the steady addition of ever more modern buildings over more than a century. What came through in the students'

accounts was that the size and shape of the campus, along with disciplinary groupings, corrals students together as well as keeps them apart. Some students' 'footprint' was very small, being restricted to a narrow range of buildings, while others had reason to – sometimes had to – use facilities all over the campus. The perception that money was spent in/on some disciplines and facilities and not others featured in a number of the focus groups, and this connects back to the broader context of UK higher education as marketized and commodified. Alongside this, Russell's location in an affordable, diverse, and accessible, English city, attracts students, as does its positioning in the UK as a as a popular destination for overseas visitors.

## Conclusions

The three elements – organization, social composition, and geography – all influence each other. The organisational culture revolves around maintaining the university's high status, and this attracts a mix of people who in part constitute, and contribute to, that culture. There are dynamics within that social composition which enable and hinder relationships, and sometimes create friction, between different subject and/or social constituencies. The campus acts as a container for this, controlling the flows of people towards and away from one another while also projecting something of the university's culture as both old and new, caring and neglectful, traditional and forward-facing.

As a sociologist of education, the social dynamics have been of particular interest, and the divisions between groups represents a problem. While it is not to say that we should expect universities to be entirely harmonious and integrated, if diversity and cross-group interaction are seen to be an essential part of the student experience – and if they are what some staff and students want – then universities do need to facilitate it. This project has shown that simply putting a variety of people on the same campus, in the same building, or even in the same room, is not enough.

There are a number of things in this study which add to what we know about students' experiences. Overall, combining the organizational, social, and geographical provides a richer way of understanding the ways in which universities differ that public 'measures' such as rankings cannot possibly capture. The findings also offer a rare insight into the ways in which a university's physical characteristics feature in, and shape, its students' lives.

Furthermore, there is relatively little scholarship exploring students' views of the wider university body as the majority of work examines the experiences of particular – usually marginalised – groups in relation to others. It should be noted, too, that the unforeseen timing of this study around two periods of industrial action highlighted how this impacted students' learning experience and their loss of value for money, particularly for international students. What was also clear, though, was that the strikes contributed to participants' sense of starkly divergent orientations towards higher education between academic and management staff.

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