

## Ultraversity - a case study of online learning



Marion Cope, Ultraversity Student  
Researcher graduating in February 2008  
and Community Nurse

**Richard Millwood,**  
Director Core Education UK,  
formerly directing Ultralab at  
Anglia Ruskin University

Core UK is a not-for-profit team devoted to innovation in learning and technology, across all phases and sectors in education.

Core UK is led by Richard Millwood, who directed Ultralab from January 2005 to January 2007, having helped build its global reputation over a decade and a half.

Core UK has developed alongside its sister organisation, Core NZ, based in Christchurch New Zealand, which was originally founded as 'Ultralab South' in May 2003.

The photograph shows an Ultraversity student, Marion Cope who works as a Community Nurse. She will graduate in February 2008 with a BA Learning Technology Research.

## An account of an Ultralab project carried out between January 2003 and December 2006



2

The Ultraversity Project was developed at Ultralab, a research department of Anglia Ruskin University. This department was established in 1990 and has conducted many globally-significant action research projects. Foremost amongst these are the Notschool .net project which provided an online learning community for adolescents for whom school did not fit. Another major project was Talking Heads, which connected the headteachers of the UK in an informal online learning community.

These projects informed the design and development of the Ultraversity project and many of its personnel were drawn from these and other projects. The staff of Ultralab engaged in this project worked online from their homes around the UK and Ultralab itself was based in Chelmsford Essex. The team had worked closely together in this way for three years on the Talking Heads and associated projects before beginning the Ultraversity Project. Prior to this, many had worked on the Tesco SchoolNet 2000 project with its emphasis on schools publishing on the internet and on digital creativity.



- An action research project to develop higher education courses which **fit the needs of 'working' people** who wish to (or need to) continue working and studying full time
- Begun in January 2003, recruited in July 2003
- Developed BA Learning Technology Research at Anglia Ruskin University
- Supported development of MA Creative Media Practice at Bournemouth University

**How?**

3

The Ultraversity Project identified a need for higher education for working people, who could not afford to be at university due to financial , family or access issues.

The development began in earnest in January 2003, accelerated to recruit before July 2003 in order to satisfy the university's need to fulfil HEFCE targets.

This first product was the BA programme, but in 2005/6 Ultralab acted as consultants to Bournemouth University in the development of an MA in Creative Media Practice, intended for professionals in the broadcast, film and other entertainment industries, whose workplace was the essential place to learn and for whom attendance could be difficult.



Based on the ideas of Professor Stephen Heppell, the Ultralab team formulated the degree design, but were informed and inspired by others at Anglia Polytechnic University (APU, as Anglia Ruskin was named prior to November 2005).

Significant amongst these was the University Centre for Accreditation and Negotiated Awards (UCANA) - the pioneering work carried out by this centre supported the proposals for negotiation on subject focus and on degree title. Also significant was the involvement of UCANA staff with a passion for learning that was both personal and relevant to student's work.

Equally significant was the work of APU's Professor Richard Winter, who created the Patchwork Text model which formed the basis of Ultraversity's thinking on assessment.

Finally there were many senior and junior staff in the university, from academic, admin and technical backgrounds, who rolled up their sleeves and invented solutions to the many challenges facing a fully online degree.

# BA (Hons) Learning Technology Research

- Focus on **action to improve ‘work’** context
- **‘Learn while you earn’** - 3 years, part time but full time credit weighting
- Not located in any subject discipline, but in a methodological discipline of **action research**
- **100% online**, no face-to-face
- Validated twice, and **QA by Anglia Ruskin University**

5

The major work of the project has been the development of the BA (Hons) Learning Technology Research. The motivation to improve the ‘work’ context is the students’ driver and the degree is intended to equip students to do this whilst learning and throughout life.

No subject is specified, but action research is the core discipline in this fully online course. The first face-to-face meeting for many is the graduation ceremony - 120 of 140 turned up for the first major ceremony in November 2006. The degree was first validated in May 2003 and then a second time in 2005, due to the university deciding to re-validate all programmes.

# 'Work' in its broadest definition

30 Thursday, August 3rd, 2006

www.doncastertoday.co.uk

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## Using life's challenges to learn

EVE Thirkle was just three months into a degree course when her son was diagnosed as autistic.

But Eve didn't panic and abandon the course.

Instead she used her studies to find out more about ten-year-old Jonathan's condition and how she could help him.

"The degree, a BA (Hons) in Learning, Technology and Research, is based around your work," said Eve, 47.

"When I started the course, I was working as a teaching assistant at Kingfisher Primary School.

"But when Jonathan was diagnosed, I gave up my job to look after him and was able to base my coursework around him."

Jonathan, a pupil at Canon Popham Primary School, has high-functioning autism. He is excellent at maths but strug-

### WOMEN

gles with some everyday situations.

"When I'm cross with him, he just doesn't pick up on it at all," explained Eve. "I have to tell him I'm cross and how cross I am on a scale of one to ten because he is very mathematical."

The degree course allowed her to carry out a year-long study looking at how she and husband, David, 45, an accountant at DMBC, could improve their parenting skills and change the home environment to best help Jonathan.

"It gave me a focus at a time when it was very easy to get depressed," said Eve, who recently became chairman of Doncaster Autistic Society. "It

was something for me to do that made me step outside the day-to-day situation and made me feel I was doing something about it."

The qualification, offered by Anglia Ruskin University, is available for study online which was ideal for Eve in her changed circumstances.

Although the former radiographer does admit it was a steep learning curve getting to grips with the IT skills.

She said: "I started out with only slightly more than basic computer knowledge but, by the end of the course, I could produce video, web pages and sound clips."

Another bonus of the course was the virtual friends she made along the way.

"I have made some good friends online and I am looking forward to meeting them at the graduation ceremony."



Eve Thirkle, 47, of Langfield Drive, Edenthorpe, celebrates after achieving a first class degree in Learning Technology and Research. She used her work with her autistic son Jonathan, ten, as a basis for her research (D7833LR)

6

'Work' is defined broadly and includes voluntary and domestic activity. The activity needs to be capable of improvement and research.

Eve Thirkle started the degree as a Teaching Assistant, but her son was diagnosed with autism three months after starting. Eve switched to studying his development needs and her role in as a parent raising him.

Eve graduated with a First Class honours degree in July 2006.

From her local newspaper, Doncaster Today:

"It gave me a focus at a time when it was very easy to get depressed," said Eve, who recently became chair of the Doncaster Autistic Society.

# Student researchers

- Candidates for **widening participation & lifelong learning** - often low income, can't stop working or raising families
- About **300** in 6 cohorts from July 2003
- Scattered **all over the UK**
- Teaching assistants, ICT technicians, bursars **from schools**
- **Health service**, managers, retail, **parents**
- Recruited in two **cohorts** each year

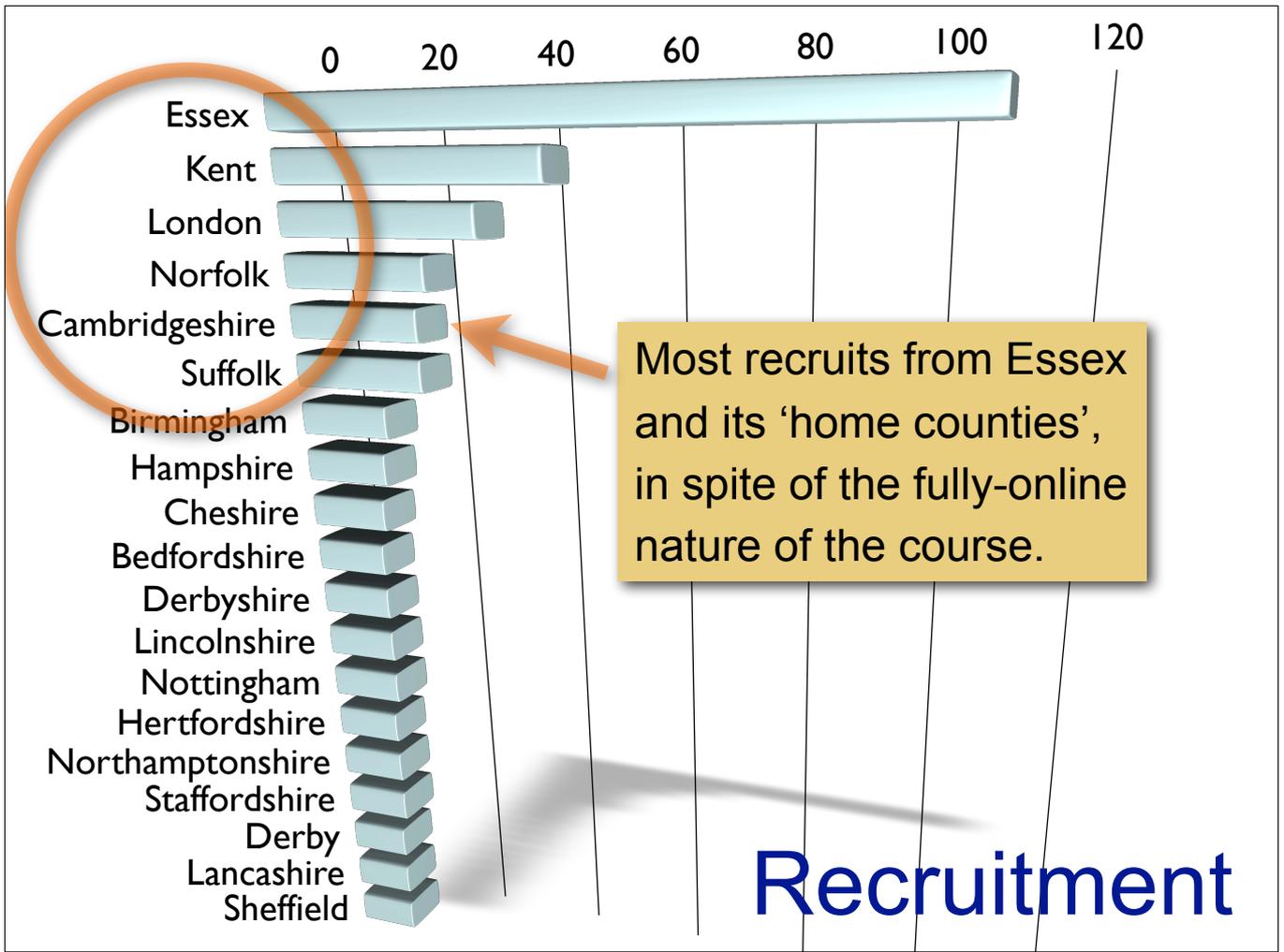
7

The student researchers could not attend face-to-face university because they need to keep their job or raise the family. For many, the Open University route would take too long and they were prepared to put in the spare time to study more rapidly.

Most are from the school workforce, but a significant minority are in the health service and there are others from a broad range of contexts.

The course recruits in September and February to fit in with the university's pattern of recruitment, assessment panels.

Cohorts are important in order to build communities where students are sharing the same challenges and able to support each other as they work to common process goals.



The majority are recruited from the 'home counties' of Essex and Cambridge - perhaps because they have more confidence in the reality of Anglia Ruskin University which is based in Chelmsford, Essex and Cambridge and with regional presence. Fully online degrees suffer from the same kind of initial scepticism that other online institutions have

What did they study?		Action Enquiry titles analysed by principal theme and workforce for 148 researchers in their final year, 2006							
		total in each workforce							
		1	2	10	1	13	3	1	117
total in each theme	workforces themes	care	charity	early years	HE	health	LEA	research	school
4	assessment					1			3
3	behaviour								3
17	communication			3		1	3		10
2	community				1			1	
2	CPD								2
8	environment	1							7
6	inclusion					1			5
28	learning			3		4			21
19	literacy								19
13	management					5			8
1	multicultural								1
2	numeracy			1					1
9	parents			3		1			5
17	pastoral		1						16
5	resources		1						4
7	special needs								7
5	teaching								5

9

The school workforce (final column, numbering 117) dominates in the first cohort, but in subsequent cohorts the diversity has increased.

The majority of actions (highlighted in red) were on themes of learning, literacy, pastoral care and communication.

I believe this reassures employers that left to their own devices, together with a commitment to improve the workplace, students will research the issues that are current and relevant.

**Average age 40  
80% women**

**Outliers aged 18 and 60**

10

The age and gender profile matches teaching assistants, but there are significant 'outliers'.

One student researcher, aged 18, left school with three A-levels to take up a post as a Teaching Assistant. He subsequently signed up for the degree and graduated in July 2006, having studied full-time and worked full-time in the job he loved.

# Combining innovations

## Personalised learning

Negotiation of study focus through individual learning plan, inquiry proposal

## Inquiry-based learning

Action research methodology, critical reflection, learning at and through work, workplace advocate

## Online community of inquiry

Expert witnesses, challenge and debate, support, sharing findings, critical feedback, access to online library

**Graduate Skills - a confident, lifelong eLearner**

## Exhibition for dissertation

Shared inquiry findings to stakeholders, evaluated for impact

## Assessment for learning

No exams, patchwork presentation, e-portfolio, peer review

The course has combined several innovations to create an approach which focusses on the development of a graduate with confidence, sustainable learning skills & habits and competent to use technology independently.

The regionally distributed team who developed this model, maintained a successful online community of practice themselves as they grew in confidence and know-how to offer the degree, and this is one of many departures from typical university practice.

# Maturity

- comfortable with innovation as an **innovator**
- **contributor** to knowledge
- confident to be a critical **questioner**
- and an **initiator** of proposals



12

The outcome is a mature practitioner comfortable with innovation, contributing to knowledge in the workplace and beyond, confident to critically question initiatives and initiate proposals.

# Relevance and evidence

“I have enjoyed doing this action enquiry because it is **relevant to my daily duties** and it has made huge improvements to the way I record and reflect. The child has improved tremendously and **I have evidence to prove it !**”

13

Evidence-based practice is like apple pie - how could we deny its goodness? In this degree, the source of evidence is both from ‘best-evidence’ published in research papers through authoritative, peer-reviewed journals and that generated by the student researcher.

This ‘user-generated evidence’, developed against an expectation of rigour, quality and integrity, may not identify ‘gaps in knowledge’, but can help students relate abstract reports from other contexts to their own and to have confidence in their own professional judgements.

# Impact and confidence

“I still think this is the **best opportunity of higher education** I'm ever likely to have and the fact that it ties in with work makes it more interesting and certainly has **changed my practice for the better.**

I find **I question situations more** and if things aren't working, **I feel confident enough to suggest alternatives.**”

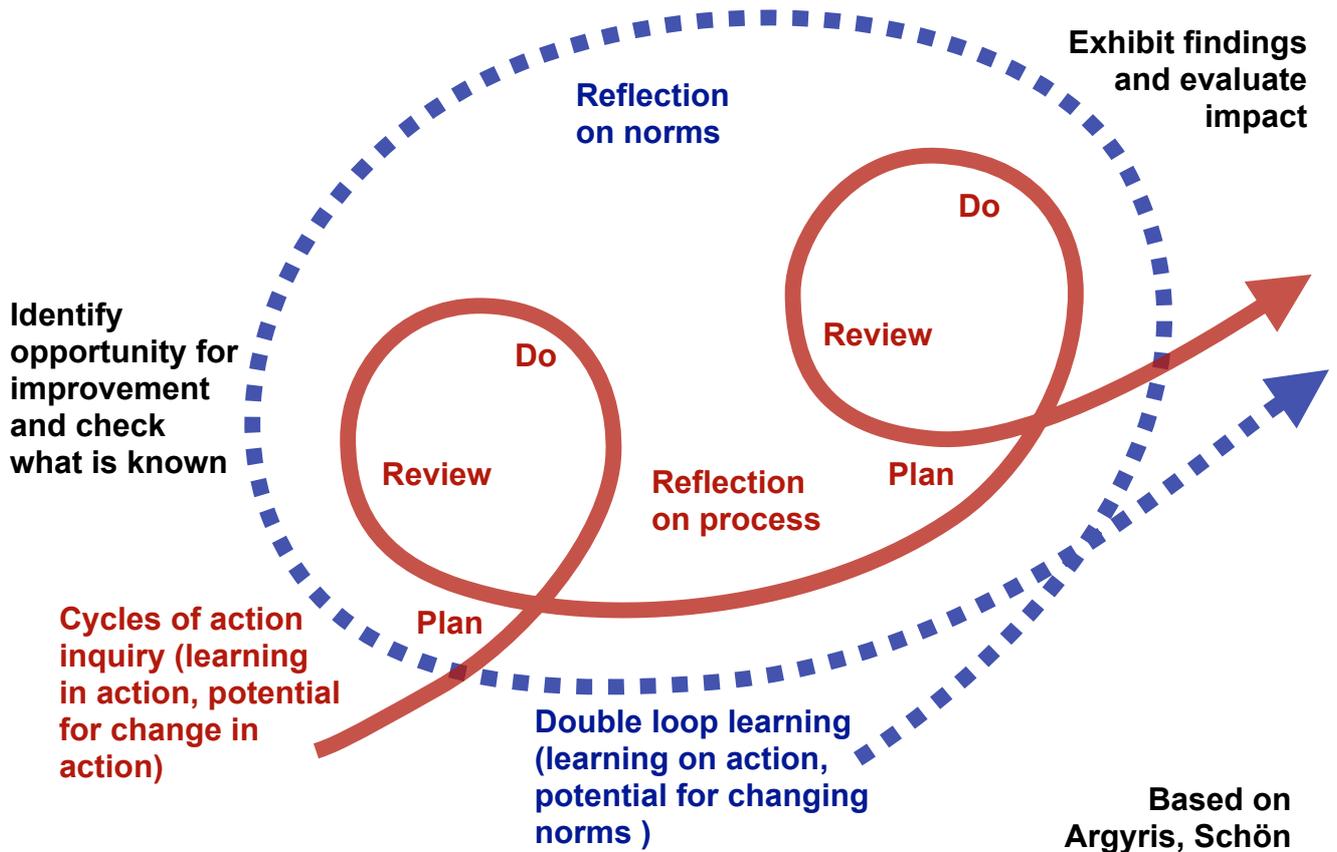
I would argue that a questioning attitude is the fountain of lifelong learning. This is not a character trait, inherited at birth, but it is built on confidence, interest and knowledge. It forms the basis for the suggestion of alternatives and thus drives creativity in the workplace to improve it.

# Technology

- **skills and knowledge** in online services
- developing **autonomy** and independence
- the need to be an **online practitioner** beyond qualification
- a private space as a launch pad for **public identity** as confidence increases

It has been an important focus to study the application of information and communications technologies - an essential skill for continuing engagement with the wider community and lifelong learning.

# Inquiry-based learning



16

An Action Research model is the basis for this version of Inquiry Based Learning.

Initially student researchers identify where improvement can be made in their workplace.

After checking what is known about the potential, they plan action, do it and review, reviewing their process as the cycle is repeated to improve.

Student researchers are guided to a double loop of reflection, looking outside the action's scope to the surrounding organisation and questioning its norms as part of the context for action.

# Sources of authority

- **work** - own practice, local experience & evidence, work & professional documents
- the **online community** - of others on the degree from a range of workforces
- the **internet** - online journals, library
- 'hotseat' **experts**, publicly answering contextualised queries, using knowledge of best practice and theoretical concepts
- **external examination** - from practice as well as academia?

17

In a course where the facilitators may not be experts in the student researcher's field, it is important to identify how authority in the student's research and learning is built and assured. But what is clear is that this can be a shared process between lead practitioners and higher education researchers.

# Online community of inquiry

Evidence from Talking Heads (UK headteachers online community of practice) and Virtual Heads (UK trainee headteachers)



Chapman, C., Ramondt, L., Smiley, G., (forthcoming, 2004)

The degree depends on online community to function - students help each other and challenge each other as they learn together.

The strength of this community is hypothesised to achieve depth in learning, a phenomenon noted by Leonie Ramondt and Carole Chapman when analysing the nature of the Talking Heads community in 2005.

# Community and expression

“Why is it I feel the community is **a safe haven for my thoughts?** Something has changed and its not just the increase in confidence where dealings with the community is concerned. I'm taking it for granted this year that **I can express my thoughts, views, complaints, suggestions frankly with no qualms or fear of ridicule.** What has happened? It is as if the floodgates of my thoughts have flung themselves open and **I am allowed to bring forth** all those ideas that have been hiding away in dusky corners of my mind.”

- Amanda Smith, Cohort 3

19

19

I believe that learning arises in the context of students expressing their ideas and then evaluating these expressions.

It is vital to feel free to express tentative thoughts in order to perfect them - online community in the case of Ultraversity clearly empowers students in this way.

# Community and expertise

“At first I was very sceptical about the use of community for learning. **I did not trust the concept of learning from other ‘ordinary’ people.** I wanted my Learning Facilitator to validate all information for me. Soon I realised that these [students] were ‘extraordinary’ people, with a wealth of knowledge and especially experience among them. They were people who were conquering their struggle to juggle home, family, work and study and far from doubting their contribution to my learning **I began to be in awe of their expertise.**”

20

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Student researchers do not instinctively trust each other as sources of authority - schooling has suggested otherwise.

Sustained community, focussed on developing trust and agreeing shared purposes, helps them to appreciate each other's strengths.

# Community and affect

“I do feel that **individuals emotions** have not been taken into consideration. e.g. I didn't expect on-line learning to be so 'addictive'. I was never comfortable with using chat rooms before, but First Class is **an excellent meeting place** for advice, support or just a chat. I also didn't feel that the [Guardian] article put across the **very deep bond** our cohort has forged. I look upon my fellow researchers and LF's, not just as peers but good friends - not bad for being complete strangers 18 months ago. **I can't remember life before Ultraversity** and I am wondering what life is going to be like when we all graduate.”

- Lynn, Cohort 3

21

21

This remark was made in response to a newspaper article titled 'The University Where Everyone is a Stranger'. (Stephen Hoare, Tuesday June 20, 2006 The Guardian).

Student researchers were quick to point out how strong the bonds were between them and how much they had been rewarded by the friendships which had developed online.

# NO EXAMS



22

The innovation in assessment in the Ultraversity project is founded on the Patchwork Text model of Professor Richard Winter (<http://web.apu.ac.uk/richardwinter/pt.html>).

In this model, students are encouraged to communicate often, in relatively small pieces, using a range of genre and media.

The key element is the stitching of these pieces, reflecting on the learning journey made.

# Assessment for learning

## 6a. Module Description:

This module introduces you to the concept of reflection in your work place by reflecting on what, when, and why you do

You will learn about models of reflective practice and 'critical incidents' that you identify in your workplace

Module content will be appropriate to individuals in the workplace and facilitators who will help you identify appropriate models

This is a web delivered distance learning module. You will access learning resources, participate in the online learning activities and complete the assessment.

All key resources will be available online. In addition to the resources defined during the planning of the learning activities, you will access resources of the researcher's work context.

## 6b. Outline Content:

- Explore different models and processes of reflection
- Identify 'critical incidents' from your workplace;
- Reflect upon these critical incidents using different models
- Identify your learning from the reflection and evaluation

## 6c. Key Texts/Literature:

Terrell, I (2003) 'A Tour Through Reflection', Ultra

Bolton, G. (2001) 'Reflective Practice: writing and thinking', Sage

Schon, D. (1987) 'Educating the Reflective Practitioner', Jossey-Bass

Schon, D. (1983) 'The Reflective Practitioner: How Professionals Think in Action', Basic Books

Pollard, A. (2002) 'Reflective Teaching: Effective and Evidence Informed Professional Practice' Continuum



## Year 1 Module

"Reflection in the work setting"  
Submitted as part of the  
patchwork assessment

An example of work submitted as part of the patchwork assessment.

This animated movie describes a critical incident in the workplace as part of a Year 1 Module "Reflection in the work setting".

This student researcher is also a graduate of Notschool.net.



Another example of work submitted - this movie describes a 'gap in knowledge' about resources for siblings of autistic children.

The authentic voice of such a sibling, describing their difficulties, is a key feature.



Another example of work submitted.

In this movie, students report their 'learning gains' from the interventions made by the student researcher.

# Personalised learning

<b>Year 1</b>	<b>Year 2</b>	<b>Year 3</b>
Investigating the Work Setting	Reflection on the Work Setting 2	Review and Planning
Introduction to Online Communication	Action Inquiry	Exhibition Preparation
Reflection on the Work Setting 1	Learning in the Work Setting	Implementing Action Inquiry and Exhibition
Understanding Action Inquiry	Independent Learning or Language	Exhibition Validation and Defence
<b>Certificate</b>	<b>Diploma</b>	<b>Honours Degree</b>

26

The process curriculum offers the student researcher the preparation to embrace action enquiry, technology and exhibition.

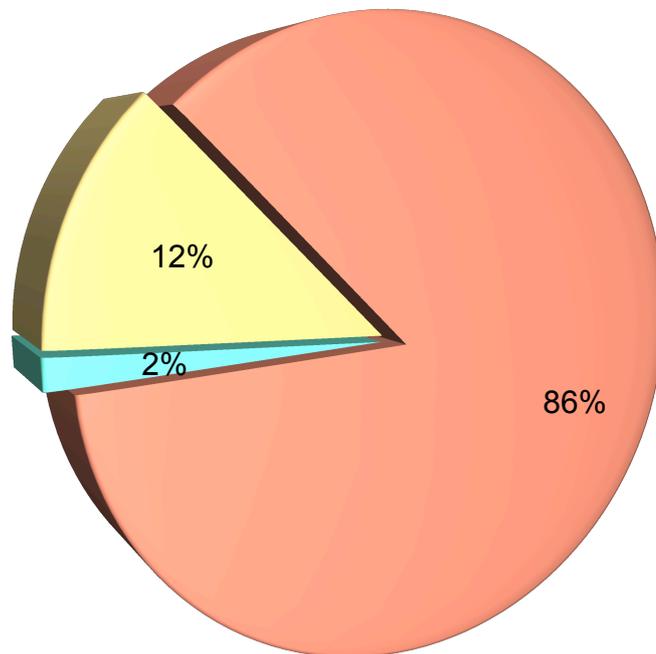
This is a highly personalised curriculum, since the content studied is negotiated for each module and is focussed on the student's own work.

Further personalisation is achieved through the options to intermit, to leave with an award at each level and to negotiate the title of the degree.

# Personalisation

To what extent has there been personalisation of the learning experience?

- None
- Some
- Significant



n = 65

Source: Graduation Exit Survey July 2006

The student researcher body recognised substantial personalisation for their perspective, on reflection as they graduated.

# Individual fulfilment

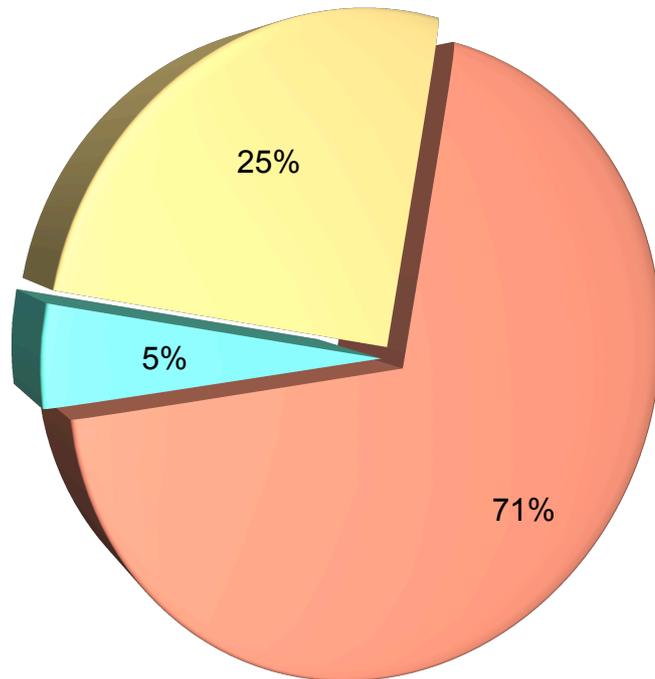


Students report their motivation to study in terms of fulfilling their own life agenda.

# Organisational improvement

To what extent  
has there been  
workplace  
impact?

- None
- Some
- Significant



n = 65  
Source: Graduation Exit Survey July 2006

Student researchers also report substantial levels of organisational improvement resulting from their study.

# Individual fulfilment and organisational improvement

“I am getting so much from this degree, everything I have done up to date has enabled me to move forward, gave me food for thought, and gave me direction. **My line manager has used everything I have done to the full.** I am now able to relay a particular message within a training session because of the research I have done. E.G. Learning Styles. I was able just today talk to 20 TA's regarding the LS they use and how they support the children. I referred to websites, literature and research. **This gave me a great sense of achievement.**”

30

This organisational improvement also impacts on their sense of personal achievement and thus fulfilment.

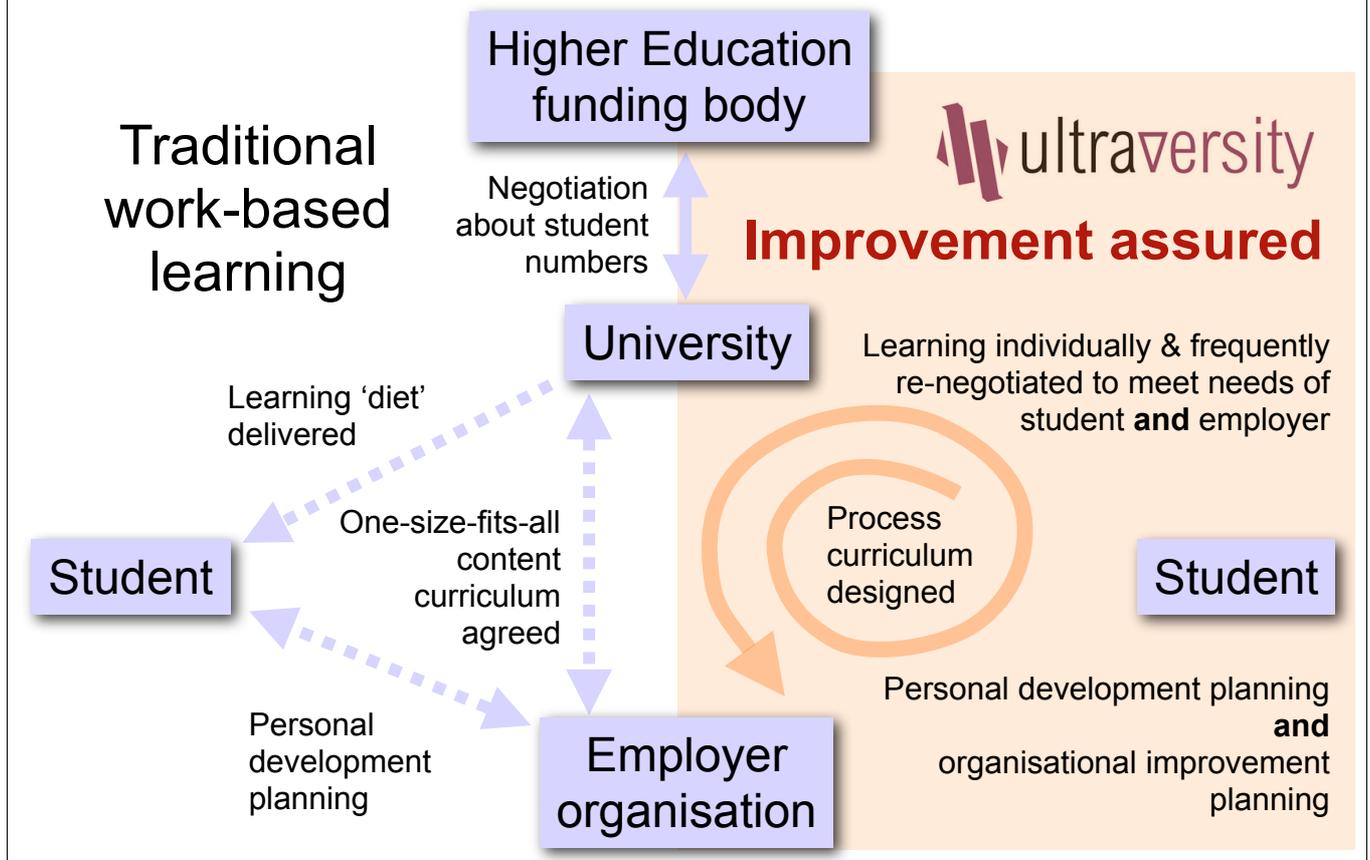
# Individual fulfilment **and** organisational improvement

“I am doing this degree for myself but it's nice to see that the teachers at school are starting to **value my opinions**”

Lesley Sheppard, ICT Higher Level Teaching Assistant and the ICT coordinator

Many of the student researchers would have had low status in the workplace, often disregarded for continuing professional employment events or involvement in organisational improvement.

# Organisational improvement



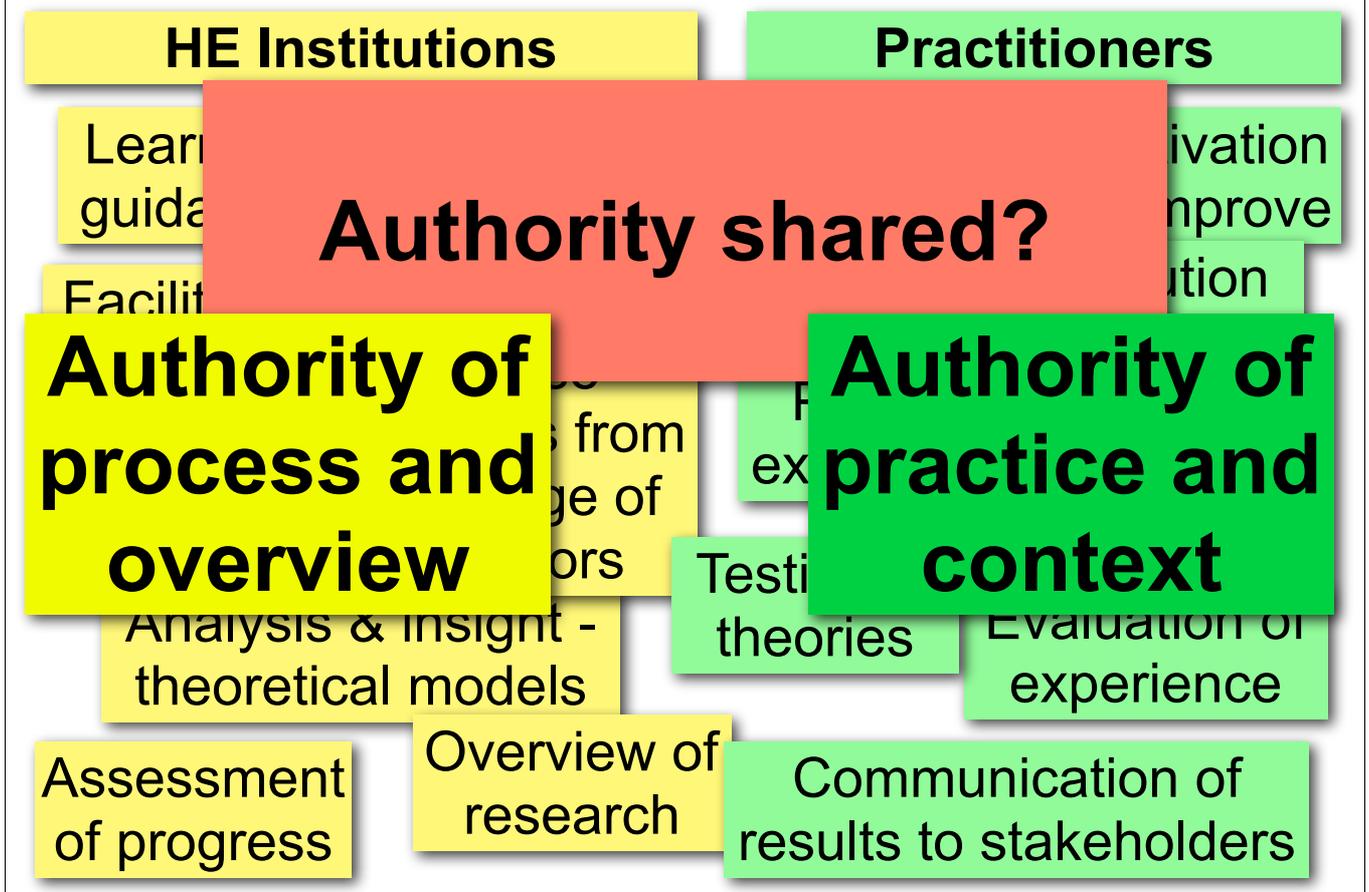
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A caricature of the development of Foundation Degrees would suggest that it is a 'stitch-up' between employer and university, which is slow to develop and is then applied to the 'patient' after a protracted development. The curriculum suffers from being difficult to up-date and inflexible if oriented towards content in fast-moving professional contexts.

Ultraversity has developed a process curriculum, which does not define any detailed content, focussing instead on the disciplines of action enquiry, digital creativity and exhibition.

It is contended that these disciplines, when linked to the twin drivers of personal fulfilment and organisational improvement set up the learner for lifelong learning and the organisation for considerable assurance of improvement.

# Rôle of the HEI



It is important to identify the rôle of the Higher Education Institution when the focus is on the student researcher and on their workplace.

In my view, although there are authoritative strengths in both university and workplace, this is a case of sharing authority, blurring the boundaries and extending the university into the workplace.

# HOT NEWS

140 graduates in 2006

**62 First Class Honours**

57 Upper Second

**That is 44% Firsts**

Oxbridge award about 25%

The rest award about 10-11%



**Would you invest in an institution which hits all these buttons and with this success?**

34

Although this result seems exceptional, I would argue that this population of student researchers, mainly mature women, is often found to be successful.

But the particularly high level of achievement can be linked to the focus on work - motivation to fully understand, and with authority, is high when you are improving your practice and have to convince workplace colleagues as well as university facilitators.

~~HOTTER~~  
GETTING COOL NOW!  
NEWS

Ultralab team dismantled

Delivery of BA continues  
in the Faculty of Education

... but ambition still alive to  
develop on a global scale

