The employability agenda and beyond: what are universities for?

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Stimulus paper

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The Leadership Foundation is pleased to present this latest series of 'Stimulus Papers' which are intended to inform thinking, choices and decisions at institutional and system levels in UK higher education. The themes addressed fall into different clusters including higher education leadership, business models for higher education, leading the student experience and leadership and equality of opportunity in higher education. We hope these papers will stimulate discussion and debate, as well as giving an insight into some of the new and emerging issues relevant to higher education today.

Contents

Context

In this paper, presented as a provocation for university leaders, I intend to stimulate thought and debate. As such, it is not necessarily a paper typical in the groves of Academe, evaluating and referencing contrasting preceding papers. While I draw on established concepts, I also present actual practice in higher education, relating this to political and quasi-economic matters. Ultimately, the paper is designed to provoke university leaders to question conventional wisdom, accepted practice and politico/social direction. It starts rather factually, describing the landscape of employability in higher education, and then introduces some political considerations. Conceptual points on graduate attributes follow, before I delve into matters more contested, such as the purpose of universities, with my thoughts presented in the context of the preceding points on employability. In short, I argue for institutional and sectoral autonomy, holding that slavishly following imposed agendas will ultimately reduce our institutions' contribution to economic wellbeing.

I have chosen to describe primarily the Scottish higher education landscape in order to discuss the employability agenda and other related university outcomes, not least because I would contend that the Quality Assurance Agency Scotland's Quality Enhancement Framework has been leading the sector in areas such as embedding employability in the curriculum. Also, the issues facing Scotland are probably universal, with other countries either already addressing them, or likely to in the near future.

Introduction

Most Scottish universities have employability explicitly included in their strategic plans, indicating significant high-level commitment. Ninety-four per cent state that teaching is deliberately tailored to deliver employability. Most universities seek professional accreditation for their degrees wherever possible, and Scotland's universities are currently working with 115 professional or accredited bodies. In one year recently, Scotland's universities delivered 470,000 participant days of continuing professional development (CPD). Eighteen of 19 institutions offer bespoke courses for business on campus, and 16 of 19 offer these at industry premises.[1] As an example of the pervasiveness of employability considerations in terms of operations, one university commits, in its outcome agreement with the Scottish Funding Council (SFC), to have employer representation on every degree approval panel and also on every quality review panel.[2]

Recognising that work experience is a critically important element in improving employability skills, universities in Scotland (as elsewhere) embed employability in their operations in various ways. These include placements, 'sandwich' courses, employing visiting lecturers from industry, 'real-life' projects in curricula, recognising entre- and intra-preneurship, co-curricular award schemes that recognise achievements outside narrow disciplinary boundaries, and industry liaison boards, etc.

The political landscape

In Scotland in recent years, employability in higher education (and related areas) has been addressed in various ways. Recognising the problem of youth unemployment across society, the Scottish government in 2011 created the post of minister for youth employment, the first such appointment in the UK. This was followed in early 2012 by the publication of a draft youth employment strategy seeking to provide, support and co-ordinate opportunities to get young people into the workplace. Two of the specific aims were to expand apprenticeships, and ensure that every 16–19 year old has access to appropriate opportunities for education or training.[3]

The strategy referred to an all-government, all-Scotland approach, but prior to this, serious engagement by Scottish higher education institutions in the employability agenda began in 2004, with the publication of the SFC's Learning to Work policy document and the accompanying national Employability Enhancement Theme. Following on from this, universities and agencies in Scotland collaborated to establish the Scottish Higher Education Employability Forum (SHEEF), the successor to the Scottish Higher Education Employability Network (SHEEN), which co-ordinated the initial Learning to Work initiative in 2010.[4] Employability, employer engagement and entrepreneurship were highlighted by the SFC as long-term policy objectives. One of the principal tasks for SHEEF was to oversee the SFC's Learning to Work Two' action plan[5] which followed the initial three-year Learning to Work initiative. The SFC further identified value in supporting national co-ordination and good practice development within higher education institutions and colleges, and sharing these between sectors.

1
Universities Scotland (2013)

2
Abertay University (2013)

3
Scottish Government (2012)

4
QAA Scotland (2009); SHEEF (2010)

5
SFC (2010)

6
SHEEF (2013)

7
While recognising this success, SHEEF's funding ended in July 2013, and the body will cease to exist, although the LTW2 projects continue.

8
Carney (2012)

SHEEF was a unique, pan-Scotland, pan-agency partnership funded by the Scottish Funding Council for three years. Input from them and other influential partners such as the Higher Education Academy (HEA) Scotland, the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) Scotland, Universities Scotland, the National Union of Students (NUS) Scotland, the Scottish Institute for Enterprise (SIE) and the Association of Graduate Career Advisory Service (AGCAS) Scotland clearly had potential advantages, but it also meant that many overlapping and potentially conflicting interests had to be resolved. Furthermore, while SHEEF should have built on the work of SHEEN, the cessation of funding to the latter's employability co-ordinators network resulted in a legacy of some contributors to SHEEF feeling disempowered. Nevertheless, from its second year, SHEEF gained momentum with the adoption of a strategic plan, and a mission 'to provide strategic leadership for the employability , employer engagement, and entrepreneurship across the Scottish higher education sector'.

Within this mission, SHEEF's role was to support and promote the Learning to Work Two work-placement project. This was a large-scale, £4.7m strategic initiative to create over 2,800 (largely paid) placements. Projects included university–college–industry collaborations, third-sector internships, placements for computing students and work-based master's opportunities. Initial indications[6] are that the discrete projects have been highly successful.[7] Project leaders have, however, recognised issues of sustainability, and questions remain over whether universities in particular will be able to continue paid-placement models in partnership with industry through core funding.

The Scottish employability landscape is of course broader than SHEEF. Universities in particular have all participated, since 2003, in the distinctive, enhancement-led (rather than *assurance*) approach to quality in the sector. The Quality Enhancement Framework comprises five inter-related aspects including external institutional review and the national enhancement themes, which have included employability and graduates for the 21st century, the latter aimed at developing institution-focused graduate attributes – see below). In the latter, every university in Scotland has expressly considered the nature of 21st-century graduates through a QAA (Scotland)-funded enhancement theme, with the outcome being a robust and well-articulated collaborative grasp of the attributes needed. The current funded theme, Delivering and Supporting the Curriculum, is exploring issues such as how the curriculum is shaped and delivered, what support is required in the face of an increasingly diverse student body, and how the curriculum delivers graduate attributes.[8]

Case study examples

In what follows, I offer three very short case-study examples from two universities in Scotland that illustrate relatively novel approaches towards recognising and embedding employability.

In case study 1, Abertay University asks students, as part of a master's course, to produce a prototype of a computer game. In a deliberate replication of the computer games industry environment, students are placed in development teams that comprise a mix of expertise and disciplines; for example computer science, visual arts, audio, production management etc. Thirty-three per cent of the final credit for the course is allocated to assessing the actual product, ie the game prototype. The result is an embryonic micro-enterprise that leads in many cases to actual company formation and commercialisation. Importantly, projects are steered and advised by visiting managers from companies such as Sony and Microsoft. These managers critique concept pitches, and review technical and production schedules. Students make a connection between what they are taught and real work, thus acquiring not just subject knowledge but also valuable professional development skills.

Case study 2 illustrates a university-wide approach. At Aberdeen, there has since 2010 been university-wide, systematic provision for study outside the core curriculum to promote, for example, foreign languages, business courses, volunteering, active membership of student societies and so on. Importantly, this curriculum was developed in consultation with employers and other stakeholders.

Returning to Abertay, case study 3 draws on a national mentorship consortium. Here, representatives from industry (for example the Royal Bank of Scotland, BT and HM Revenue and Customs) mentor third-year business students for a period of six months. This meaningful engagement enables students to interact with members of the community of practice to which they aspire to belong, and enables them to relate their studies to a professional context.

A few international comparisons

As a very brief (and admittedly, relatively uninformed) counterpoint, France has no centralised body that oversees or assures teaching and learning, nor any central structure such as SHEEF that deals with issues of employability in higher education. Indeed, discussions on teaching and learning per se have only recently emerged in any truly national sense, partly in tandem with the Bologna Process.[9] While some unified national approaches exist, they are currently geared towards very specific aims, such as facilitating the use of new technologies. Nevertheless, some national networks are emerging, such as the Service Universitaire de Pédagogie (SUP). On a broader scale, the Conférence des Présidents d'Université (CPU –roughly equivalent to Universities UK) has a permanent commission titled Commission de la Formation et de l'Insertion Professionnelle, and, importantly, employability is a crucial criterion for a degree to be listed by the influential Commission National de la Certification Professionnelle (CNCP), which is in charge

10
Curvale (2013)

11
Badat (2013)

12
It is worth noting that the current Scottish government has committed to not charging student fees for Scottish students.

13
Collini (2012) p5

14
SFC (2013)

of the French National Qualifications Framework.[10] A continent away, South Africa's radically diverse higher education sector has become more proactive nationally through the formation in 2005 of Higher Education South Africa, which represents the country's 23 vice-chancellors. Its teaching and learning strategy group has between six and eight members, with not every university represented. As in France, there is no central or national co-ordinating body for employability in higher education. In both countries, local employability initiatives abound, but autonomy and variation exist both within and between institutions.[11]

This is not to suggest that the Scottish approach to employability in the curriculum is an unreserved good for higher education. On the contrary, as my later arguments suggest, much care must be taken when we tinker or interfere instrumentally or teleologically with what our universities do.

Outcome agreements

Moving to the more explicitly political sphere, recognition of the importance of employability in higher education in Scotland has extended to its inclusion in outcome agreements (OAs). In general, British universities are reliant on public funding.[12] While more stringent criteria have accompanied such funding in recent years, governments (through the respective funding councils) 'have (so far) respected the principle of the autonomy of universities', allowing them to determine their own operations, including which degrees they offer.[13] However, there are signs that this might be changing, most notably in Scotland, with the introduction of outcome agreements.

Currently unique to Scotland in higher education, outcome agreements have replaced the Main Grant Letters as a source of university funding. They are intended to be bilateral consensual agreements between the SFC and individual institutions, calculated to cover all government disbursement to universities and colleges. They are referred to as 'something for something' arrangements, whereby the Scottish government wants quantifiable deliverables in return for what was generally perceived as a generous funding settlement (relative to England and Wales, at least).[14]

Outcome agreements currently cover the following areas:

a.   Pattern of participation and the learner journey; these are widely interpreted as widening access and easing transition from further to higher education.
b.   Pattern of provision; this is a reference to meeting employer and student demand, and reducing the duplication of degree offerings in regions.
c.   Research competitiveness.
d.   University and industry knowledge exchange and collaboration.
e.   Graduate skills, taken to mean the enhancement agenda, including graduate attributes and employability.

To give the reader a sense of what universities commit to in outcome agreements, I will provide just one example from an institution under each of these five areas, bearing in mind that each area can contain between 10 and 30 outcomes.[15] Some examples for the academic year 2013/14 are as follows:

a.   Thirty-five % of admissions will be classified as 40 on the Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation (ie 35% of entrants to come from the 40% most socially deprived sections of society).
b.   We commit to establishing a centre for excellence in mental health nursing – on the surface very laudable, but in practice meaning ceasing to provide adult nursing.
c.   Sixty % of academic staff will hold a PhD.
d.   Make available to the public 26 new intellectual property (IP) opportunities under an easy-access model.
e.   Ensure that every degree programme features employer engagement in delivery – further recognition of the employability agenda.[16]

These are just a few examples of outcomes. A feature of the system is that the possibility for clawback of funding is explicit. So, if the university above doesn't meet the 35% widening access target, funding might need to be returned. The Post-16 Education (Scotland) Act 2013 states:

> *Terms and conditions may be imposed on the SFC by Scottish Ministers, making a grant to the SFC, to widen access to fundable higher education for under-represented persons belonging to any socio-economic group' (S.9B (1));*

And:

> *The Post-16 Education (Scotland) Act 2013 states that 'The Scottish Ministers may, under section 9(2), impose terms and conditions for the purposes of enabling, encouraging or increasing participation in fundable higher education by persons belonging to any socio-economic group which they reasonably consider to be under-represented in such education (S.9C(1))'. The Act (S.9(2)) goes on to hold that Ministers may, in making payments to institutions, impose a condition to comply to a widening access agreement. This applies in any cases where Ministers reasonably consider any socio-economic group/s to be under-represented.*[17]

Although touted as consensual bilateral agreements, there is a widely held view in the sector that outcome agreements are a threat to university autonomy by an interventionist government – in short, a mechanism of government interference and control. On the other hand, despite teething problems, SFC discussions with institutions have been constructive, and feedback received has been acted on; for example, the need for longer term strategic outcomes has seen outcome agreements move from one- to three-year periods. There has been explicit inclusion of the employability agenda within them, but the overarching question is whether such considerations should be dictated by government, or whether universities, either collectively or individually, should be left to determine what they will focus on.

18
Pegg et al (2012)

19
See Brynin (2012), who contends that the expansion of HE raises the risk environment for school leavers.

20
Universities Scotland (2013)

21
Lowe (2013)

22
Universities Scotland (2013)

23
OECD (2013)

24
Universities Scotland (2013)

Achievements in graduate employability in Scotland

So what has Scotland achieved in terms of graduate employability? Although what follows deals largely with employment, I recognise the distinction between that and employability, the latter being the attributes that enhance employment prospects.[18] Scotland can boast the lowest unemployment levels in the UK, with graduates from Scottish universities less likely to be unemployed six months after leaving university (7% versus 9% for the rest of the UK). The percentage of those in graduate-level jobs is down from before the recession, but has shown increases from two years ago. Also, Scottish graduates are more likely to be in positive destinations (employment, further study, work plus study), with 93% being in 'graduate destination' jobs after six months. They also earn higher starting salaries, with a mean of £21,000 against £20,000 for England.[19] [20]

Lowe[21] however states that while the majority of graduates eventually find graduate-level employment, and are rewarded with an earnings premium, the recession has had a negative effect on graduate underemployment. In general terms, figures from Universities Scotland[22] below suggest that having a degree still has significant advantages in the labour market. Unemployment for those aged 16–24 without any qualifications is 46%; for those with GCSEs or the equivalent it is 25%; and for graduates it is just 6%. A recent report states that, during the economic crisis, the jobs gap between well-educated young people and those who left school early has continued to widen, with a good education still providing 'the best insurance against a lack of work experience'.[23] Also, a recent report by the Confederation of British Industry (CBI) predicts a continued shift to a demand for higher skilled jobs (including leadership and management), with demand for lower skilled jobs expected to decline. Almost all employment growth over the last decade has been for people with degrees, and graduates are expected to pay 44% of all income tax in Scotland despite being a significantly smaller proportion of the workforce. Finally, a recent Scottish Employer Skills Survey reports that 80% of employers who recruit someone straight from university consider that person well prepared for work.[24]

But does any of this really matter? Universities frequently justify their existence to politicians and broader society by means of 'evidence' such as that mentioned above. This is a defensive posture, and while it may be necessary, we have other weapons in our armoury that we seem curiously reluctant to use, but which, though traditional, might be equally or more effective than transient claims about, for example, employability. That then brings us to considerations of the sort of people universities produce and what the meta-purposes of the institutions are.

Graduate attributes

It could be contended that part of the success of Scottish universities in the sphere of employability has been due to the focus on graduate attributes (GAs). I won't in this paper attempt any sort of history or evaluation of the introduction of graduate attributes in Scotland, but a description and examples will serve to introduce a few of the more philosophical points to follow.

Surveys and anecdotal evidence indicate that the concept of a 'job for life' has disappeared. This is partly due to employee dissatisfaction and raised aspirations,[25] and partly to the pace of technological and social change leading to changes in skill demands within a particular job. Graduate attributes, at least in part, can help employees not just to cope with such changes, but also even to instigate them, one conceptual example being intrapreneurship.[26]

Scottish universities have all, in one form or another, introduced graduate attributes into their curricula, and indeed in their thinking, graduate attributes are effectively the outcomes of a higher education that involves the acquisition of higher level skills, enabling people to work individually and in teams, and across disciplines and sectors. Universities now work to prepare students for flexible work environments where mobility is accepted, and where a job in a particular sphere might mean fusing disciplinary areas or at least considering points of intersection. Increasingly, in some sectors, innovation from all workers is encouraged, and such innovative capabilities require graduates to display graduate attributes.

As an example, one Scottish university, by no means unique, seeks to produce 'confident thinkers; determined creators; flexible collaborators; and ambitious enquirers'.[27] In simple terms, this means that people should know their field or be capable of quickly mastering it; they should be able to innovate; should be able to work alone and with others; and should constantly seek improvement. Yorke[28] holds that these are a set of achievements, skills, understandings and personal attributes that make graduates more likely to gain employment and be successful, benefiting themselves, the workforce, the community and the economy. Developing them is an ongoing process, not just at university, but beyond: indeed, it could be argued that a continuous quest for improvement is an attribute in itself.

I would argue that graduate attributes are not just skills, but that they are (or should be) attitudes and dispositions. In this light, it is worth focusing for a moment on the fourth attribute above, 'ambitious enquirers', as it is relevant to the later discussion on the purpose of universities. Being an ambitious enquirer stresses a 'curiosity imperative', borrowing elements of the Popperian notion that knowledge is always provisional or conditional.[29] The 'curiosity imperative' is perhaps best delivered by lecturers stressing to their students the constant vulnerability of knowledge, of ongoing intellectual dissatisfaction. It is my contention that this is what universities are about, and that if we deliver this, then we effectively deliver employability attributes – but more of that later.

25
Woods (2011); AAT (2012)

26
Displaying the characteristics of entrepreneurship, typically through leadership of initiatives within a large organisation

27
Abertay University (2010)

28
Yorke (2006)

29
Popper (1959)

Are our current models of delivery appropriate?

From the outside, when they are not viewed as models of aloofness and intractability, universities may seem to be either beacons of stability or lighthouses resisting furious waves of change. Neither view is true of course. In general, universities tend to value tradition and what works, while at the same time seeking improvement through change. If this is true, then it is appropriate in the current climate surrounding employability in higher education to question whether our current models of thought and delivery are appropriate in the face of an ever-changing external environment.

External pressure and pressure to change are ubiquitous in higher education, and have been so through the ages. At the time of writing, institutions are thinking about the demands placed on them regarding globalisation, competition, internationalisation, flexible learner journeys, massive open online courses (MOOCS), employability, the cost of higher education and student fees, social changes and meritocracy, widening access, and so on. In Scotland the 'gold standard', four-year undergraduate degree is under threat, and there are perennial questions such as whether students with Advanced Highers are wasting a year, or whether the cost of a four-year degree is too much of a burden on the public purse, etc. Other questions involve the adoption of the Higher Education Achievement Record (HEAR) and Key information Sets (KIS); as well as whether the current degree classification system is fit for purpose.

We also frequently hear that universities have a responsibility to improve the economic prosperity of a country, almost as if they don't already significantly do so. It is my view (see below) that universities already make significant and appropriate contributions to economic growth, and that to accede to further demands, often in return for supposedly generous funding settlements, is to dilute the mission that universities *per se* have, probably to the detriment of longer term contributions to the economy. So what should our mission be?

What are universities for?

This is of course a question that has been asked both within and outside the academy for centuries, and I cannot hope to do it justice here in its broadest sense. What I would hope to do is advance some thoughts on the mission of our higher education institutions in the context of governmental and societal injunctions for increased contributions to the economy in general and employability in particular. But before expounding on what universities are for, let us consider a few points of view on what a (modern) university is.

First, let us agree at least that universities should be a public good. That is, they are not just for those fortunate enough to attend them or work in them, but for society at large. In a response to the question of what universities do for society, David Turner[30] holds that most people in society benefit from higher education, at the very least to the extent that they are users of the services provided by graduate professionals. We can even accept that universities not just are, but should be, viewed by governments 'as fundamental to the achievement of many national priorities'.[31] But that acceptance is not necessarily the same as university leaders acquiescing to demands from governments that either cannot be satisfied, or that can be satisfied but will, in the long term, detract from what universities ought to be and what they ought to deliver.

Collini[32] lists four necessary but perhaps not sufficient conditions, *viz*. that it provides post-secondary 'education' (rather than training); that it furthers advanced (rather than practical) scholarship; that there is breadth to its academic activities; and that it enjoys institutional autonomy (see above on outcome agreements). At least on the face of it, there seems to be some disjunct here from societal imperatives such as employability. There is thus at least the potential for 'tensions between the prevailing definitions of social purpose and the ungovernable play of the enquiring mind', as Collini[33] so eloquently puts it. He goes on to say that intellectual enquiry is ungovernable, and that human understanding (when not tied to specific instrumental tasks) should be unconstrained. Again, this seems somewhat at odds with the spirit behind outcome agreements. What many universities are, are sources of unconventional ideas; places where unjust societal or political conventions are challenged; and centres of thought where complex societal problems (whether scientific or social) are addressed. Above all, universities help to shape people and their ideas, and it is those people and those ideas that shape economies and societies. Outcome agreements and other governmental constraints seem to me to be often directly at odds with an environment where one's deliberations or experiments need to be (at least relatively) unconstrained, that is, without preconceived outcomes or predetermined expectations. By using instruments such as outcome agreements, and financial, regulatory and other incentivising mechanisms such as delimited calls for sectoral funding, governments seek to obtain forms of behaviour in universities that provide outcomes defined in narrow terms, such as employability of graduates.

30
Turner (2011)

31
Broughton and Lucas (2012) p2506

32
Collini (2012) p8

33
ibid.

34
Barnett (2013)

35
Collini (2012)

36
Petsko (2010) p1003

37
Thomas (2012)

38
Turner (2011)

39
ibid.

40
Ryan (2013)

41
Fernandez-Armesto (2013)

42
Broughton and Lucas (2012)

Of course, for some, the very concept of what a university is for conjures up lofty ideals of scholarly reflection over a glass of port in the senior common room, or elicits hopes of greater human understanding, wise action and the transmission of ideas across the world.[34] Even if that were ever true, Barnett points out that modern ideas about, and expectations of, universities, are that they should understand and contribute significantly to the global economy. Or, as Collini[35] has put it, governments in the UK, of whatever persuasion, have 'attempted to impose an increasingly economistic agenda on universities over the past two decades'.

This 'economistic' view entails not just the production of knowledge, but also the development of services that generate income through knowledge exchange. This is allied to the rise to prominence of market mechanisms in public services, and Petsko[36] holds that we should 'oppose the tyranny of the market' and that 'there is only one market that has any place in higher education: the marketplace of ideas'. He goes on to suggest that universities aren't just about discovering new knowledge or profiting from intellectual property, but about the preservation of ideas that might not seem relevant right now but that may become important in the future, in the sense of good ideas and concepts being timeless.

Equally emphatically, Thomas[37] contends that we experience increasing pressure from government to regulate and prescribe academic activities, thereby in effect proscribing or at least limiting some activities. Turner[38] provides the example where we now teach to agendas of skills development and learning outcomes, sacrificing our autonomy by dancing to the tune of governmental paymasters, and Thomas[39] contends that 'universities are encouraged to teach and research not what they think is intrinsically worthwhile, but what is likely to be financially most profitable'. He develops this by asserting that the central values of universities are being lost, and that a university education should be about preparing students for an uncertain future by inculcating in them in attributes such as transferable skills embodied in the graduate attributes (see above). For him, short-term political expediency is challenging the very notion of what universities are about, and he singles out vice-chancellors in particular as being nervous about alienating their paymasters as a result of their over-riding concern with matters financial.

Similarly, Ryan[40] feels that there should be less talk about changing or reinventing education, and more about giving people time and emotional space to simply think about how to do what they are already doing, better. An extension to these views is provided by Fernandez-Armesto,[41] who, writing about schools, advocates ignoring narrow curricula, with the very idea of a curriculum being derived from a misconception about what education is for. According to him, dangers lurk when politicians, employers, parents and pupils expect universities to train rather than educate.

I believe that in Scotland in particular, and almost certainly elsewhere, universities already contribute significantly to the economy. But while they can and do contribute to the economy, they are not the drivers of it. While they can create and sustain environments conducive to innovation, this is primarily a process of business engagement with markets.[42]

Universities also quite successfully pay specific attention to enhancing the employability of their students. Earlier I noted graduate employability statistics, contributions to income tax, the increased demand for higher skilled jobs, various employer satisfaction surveys, as well as universities' commitment to the employability agenda. Yet there are examples aplenty of media and populist clamour that there are 'too many graduates'.[43] But can a country really have a workforce that is too educated? Do we really need more plumbers and fewer philosophers? Or do we actually need more people in our societies who can think deeply, analyse various points of view in a problem, suggest solutions based on weighing up (among other things) the consequences of actions? I answer, of course, in the affirmative.

Further, I suggest that universities have, too often, and too easily (most recently in Scotland in the form of outcome agreements; see above), accepted too narrowly defined and too large a responsibility for social and economic engineering, in return for funding settlements. Of course government and society can reasonably expect a return for investment in higher education, but the question really should be whether that return is already there, and also whether a focus away from the primary mission of universities will ultimately devalue the return. As Broughton and Lucas[44] contend, 'there is a danger that the current approach to universities is undermining the very processes that are the source of those benefits so cherished by government.'

While universities can and do help nations leapfrog stages of economic development, they can't cure all social and economic ills. Further, 'they should not be rushed by a combination of inducements, urgency and regulation into accepting an identity proffered to them by the ambient world'.[45] What they can do is to help lay the foundations for change, not least through shaping people in appropriate ways. Collini[46] contends that we don't educate a generation so that they can contribute to the future economy, but so that we broaden and deepen their understanding of the human condition, as part of which they acquire skills and knowledge that will enable them to make a contribution to future economies. On the face of it there seems little distinction between the two aims, but there is a subtle one, and it revolves around a perhaps nebulous but not unimportant conception of what universities are for. For what it is worth, I long for the day when I peruse a university website where the (ubiquitous!) declared mission statement reads simply: 'We produce bloody good graduates!'.[47]

I would contend, following Williams,[48] and some would say traditionally, that the core function of universities is the creation and dissemination of new knowledge. They are not and should not be employment skills factories, should not be summer camps where people are happy, and should not be political footballs to solve all social ills. What they should be is places where intellectual struggle takes place, where students confront challenging new concepts, and where we explicitly 'make space for the difficult'.[49]

43
Heath (2013); Walters (2013)

44
Broughton and Lucas (2012) p2509

45
ibid. p2509

46
Collini (2012)

47
Note that here, and elsewhere, I make no claim that improving intellectual capacity is linked to improving moral capability. 'Good' graduates might be, but are not necessarily, 'good' people.

48
Williams (2012)

49
Collini (2012) p12

Now none of what I have said means that universities should not contribute to the economy. They do, and should continue to do so, but not because being richer (either as individuals or as a society) is a good in itself. Perhaps a better argument might be that being richer enables us to do better things, such us further enhance our understanding of the human condition.

What universities should do is promote the search for understanding, and help us to make sense of a complex and constantly changing world. They can do this by preserving memory and using it to sustain progress, explicitly teaching students to reduce and simplify the chaos of information, teaching us to sift what is relevant from what is superfluous. What they should do is provide us with different ways of thinking about the world from the separate and integrated perspectives of the humanities and the sciences. In doing so, they will produce self-starting and self-defining creators who help to grow the economy and improve society. The goods that universities produce in and for people are not just personal and private, but public and common goods as well. They are the common goods that enable individuals and groups to be creative and innovative, and critical to the development of these practices is an environment of unconstrained and unrestrained curiosity. Sustaining and nurturing environments where knowledge is a product of undetermined outcomes should be a greater priority for governments than restricting, even unintentionally, the autonomy of our higher education institutions.

The true value of universities lies in the creation and expansion of human capacity, thus improving the common good. This is done by promoting curiosity and by working to the premise that knowledge is provisional. What universities should continue to do is shape people who have the ability and proclivity to challenge received understanding. Graduates with the attribute of curiosity are the most valuable assets that universities can deliver to society. If we can do this, then we will be contributing to employability and the economy.

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Biography

Professor Steve Olivier is Deputy Vice-Chancellor and Vice Principal (Academic) at Abertay University. He has held leadership positions at several UK and overseas universities. He has extensive experience of quality enhancement/assurance, teaching and learning innovation, strategic organisational development and change management, research and consultancy management, and course development. Still an active researcher, he publishes regularly and was returned for REF 2014. He presents internationally, both on discipline-specific issues and international educational matters.

Steve sits on several senior Universities Scotland committees (Learning and Teaching; Research and Knowledge Exchange; International), as well as the Scottish Higher Education Enhancement Committee (SHEEC). He served as the first Chair of the Management Board of SHEEF (Scottish Higher Education Employability Forum), and has recently been appointed to the Board of Governors of Fife College.

Outside of work, he played and coached rugby at first class level, and competed in multisport endurance events. A lifelong ocean sports devotee, he still spends time on the water surfing and kayaking, and serves as a crewman in the RNLI.

Notes

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Stimulus paper