

Career-mindedness in students and universities: an informed choice?

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A central theme in liberal education, and (neo-)liberal economics, is the importance of the individual and his or her agency in choosing their own path. Of universities, Marginson and Rhoades summarise the position thus: 'The neo-liberal pattern is to reduce state subsidization of higher education, shift costs to "the market" and consumers, demand accountability for performance, and emphasize higher education's role in the economy' (Marginson and Rhoades, 2002: 285).

And from a broader range of political economy perspectives, the benefit of a university degree to the knowledge economy is to enable students to gain knowledge and demonstrate a measure of critical and strategic thinking, to manage complex, multifaceted ideas, and to respond to (and question) fast-paced changes in both knowledge and society. But if there is a gap to be bridged between academia and contemporary livelihoods, are we bridging it in the right way?

Are students being misled by league tables?

The desire by governments in Australia, the UK and around the world to produce more highly skilled workers has concentrated minds on what happens to students after graduation. Some individuals are choosing degrees based on what they perceive as the most 'guaranteed' outcome of success or prosperity – and so the question is whether this really demonstrates agency or informed choice. A central force driving enterprise is a genuine engagement with one's subject and a passion to take the next step in thinking. There is concern that foregrounding vocational aspirations might stall that spirit of enquiry rather than drive it forward. In this context, as Hemsley-Brown and Oplatka explain, 'students can be either considered as customers (with courses as the higher education products) or as products with the employers being the customers' (Hemsley-Brown and Oplatka, 2006: 319).

Consider the outcomes that are currently used in league tables and how they can inform choice making. Graduate employment figures are the data favoured by governments, and principally comprise the 'first destination' data, which Alderman and Palfreyman in their article on the origins of the market between UK universities contend is used by prospective students to choose institutions (2011: 81). This data is readily accessible to researchers and is also used in university league tables by global news media: the focus of much research is on the basis of first destinations (i.e. early outcomes) of graduates. Such outcome statistics belie the

importance of making career decisions based on *and supportive of* an individual's preferences and abilities (skills and knowledge among them) over time. There is ample research indicating that the results of degrees may take many years to be shown or develop (Purcell et al., 2005); the benefits of a degree rarely show in the first year after graduating – yet this is the period used to generate the indicators.

If higher education and training is viewed necessary for a workforce that meets the demands of a challenging technological future, why are we privileging (by means of league tables) statistics such as the percentage of students in full-time work around four months after graduating? The point of the lengthy, expensive process of higher education is to achieve a life-lasting outcome. Further, it is instructive that though an entrepreneurial culture would validate self-employment, this does not necessarily score well as a graduate outcome statistic. This suggests that many students, as consumers, would still rather find employment – or are seen to want this.

What do students want?

Repeated studies of students' perspectives on institutions show that a degree operates to 'improve the chances of moving up the income ladder', as indicated in a US-based study of meritocracy in higher education (Liu, 2011: 10); Warmington's research with mature UK Access students reported that for students, higher education is viewed as an 'escape from little jobs' (Warmington, 2003: 99). In the UK, the single-institution student-survey-based research of Glover et al. revealed that 80 per cent of respondents sought a 'better chance of employment' (Glover, Sue and Youngman, 2002: 298).

Archer and Hutchings' discussion-group research based on young Londoners not participating in higher education describes the view of a degree affording a 'chance not to be stuck' (Archer and Hutchings, 2000: 564), and this is a widespread view of the purposes of modern university degrees echoed in Archer's article in her co-authored book *Higher Education and Social Exclusion* (Archer, Hutchings and Ross, 2003), and also the literature review by Bennion et al. on part-time students (Bennion, Scesa and Williams, 2011). In more theoretical terms, degrees are regarded as passports to cultural capital (Riseborough, 1993, quoted in Warmington, 2003: 107).



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What do we value?

How degrees as goods are recognised and differentiated is a complicated question, and there are indicators in longitudinal studies such as that by Bratti et al., quoting Moffitt, that the UK graduate premium at least is falling (Moffitt, 2007, in Bratti, Naylor and Smith, 2008: 7), and although the 'graduate premium' is a complex marker, it is a widely accepted concept that graduates across their lifespan are paid more than non-graduates. It has been shown that credentials have always been used as a signal, as is discussed by Arkes who states, in terms of recruitment, that 'firms reward educational attainment in part because a higher education signals qualities that are initially unobservable to employers and that indicate greater productivity' (Arkes, 1999: 133).

There are certainly indicators of worth and status determined by the awarding institution (Liu, 2011), and this 'hierarchy of prestige in types of qualifications and also institutions' (Brown, DK and Bills, 2011) is overtly and apparently unproblematically codified in the league tables that now abound. However, these are external markers and of greatest import is that prospective students make choices based not on the league tables using a small sample of data but on preferably solid careers development education on an individual basis. This does not have to be delivered by an individual practitioner, as shown by the excellent (and free) Australian website myfuture.edu.au, where students can take a battery of careers tests and rate competency and enjoyment of skills and then compare the career outcomes available on the basis of their skills.

In promoting entrepreneurship developed from a higher education, and particularly in the quest for a knowledge economy, practitioners are not necessarily encouraging skills that are positive for the economy only, but by fostering well-thought-out and reflected-upon career choices for individuals and giving them the space to create. To achieve this goal, students should be counselled to choose degree subjects in which they can properly engage, paying some attention to the league tables as possible indicators of quality. But the outcomes of degrees should not operate only as a 'guarantee' of successful, and enterprisingly positive, employment.

Conclusion

Providers of education generally claim they are able to launch and develop careers (compensating cost and risk), but in focusing on their structures for doing this, what is often lost is the individual's position and career direction. This is perhaps unsurprising, because seeing universities' economic roles in terms of a business skills-base – universities as drivers of entrepreneurship – is relatively new and chaotic to try to control. Universities are not practised at focusing only on their economic roles and effects as a whole, let alone, in the most part, fostering start-ups or entrepreneurial employability within that.

And this too may be unsurprising, if having one purpose is at odds with what universities understand themselves to be about. As Sussex University's Professor of Higher Education says of the UK, 'the central legitimating idea of higher education... is changing.

Increasingly, it is being viewed as a sub-system of the economy' (Morley, 2001: 131). Developing knowledge and developing economically self-sustaining individuals are perhaps not one and the same project. Perhaps they are governed by different time-scales, different needs and even different values. Career development theory tells us that people achieve better and have more positive outcomes when their career draws together all strands of their individual narratives – is this perhaps also a lesson for institutions?

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