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Money and morals: the employability agenda in higher education

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Research Questions

Whilst the historic *raison d'être* of the university has been vocational education, we have seen a considerable period of decline (see MacIntyre, 1987) from a concern with improving the well-being of citizens to a concern with the development of knowledge within a series of discrete disciplines. This, according to MacIntyre, results not only in a decline of 'the educated public', but also in the distortion of the academic disciplines. MacIntyre is clear that the decline of the 'educated public' is not simply a decay of the academy, but follows from a range of socio-political changes in 17th century Scotland (its last outpost), some of which, for example, an increase in those receiving an adequate education, we would want to applaud. However, he heralds a concern that the modern academy is not a viable context for the development of an educated coterie of vocationally competent practitioners able to critically support the enhancement of human well-being (see Wain, 1995 for a critique of MacIntyre's views).

Recent years have seen a rise in concern for graduates' preparedness for entry into the job market, heightened by Leitch (2006) and the direct linking of 'graduate skills' of this type with the economic efficiency of 'UK plc'. This concern has worked itself out in three ways. Firstly, there is the development of employer engagement programmes in HEIs that seek to support vocational education delivered in innovative ways and highly responsive to the needs of employers and the workplace. These have also piloted 'co-funding models' (see BIS, 2009, for the broader ambition of this approach). Secondly, there is the strengthening of specifically vocational programmes. Thirdly, we have seen the development of pre-vocational education across the university. By pre-vocational I want to draw directly on the language developed in pre-university contexts (see for example Pring, 1995, Davies, 2008), and include work experience, as well as work-focussed activities in particular programmes, and university wide 'add-ons', for example entrepreneurial training.

Frame

It may be argued that this concern with 'employability' has little to do with 'well-being'. I disagree. In terms of the individual the value of being employable is by virtue of three components: it increases the possibility of personal choice of occupation; it increases the level of resources available to the individual (primarily financial capital, but also social and other forms of capital); and it provides a sense of security for the future. For society, as a whole, the claim of the value of employability are similar, that graduates with high employability are likely to increase the resources available to society and provide a sense of confidence in the future prospects. These are not simply about increasing GDP. In fact, a focus on GDP without a commensurate concern with well-being may lead to adverse consequences. We might here use the example of banking. Banking may be, and may would argue has been, seen as a matter of increasing profit and profitability. The result is a decrease in well-being (summed across the society as a whole). In fact, the expert opinion is that this was a foregone conclusion of banking practices. Banking which is concerned with the well-being of the society as a whole would be differently, and more ethically, constructed. Discussions about employability need to be located in a more general, ethically nuanced account of human agency.

It is such an account of human agency that MacIntyre provides (MacIntyre, 1985). For MacIntyre human agency is always grounded in some account of ethical theory, and for him the only reasonable account is a development of Aristotelian ethics. This I take as a starting assumption, the argument is clearly and convincingly made by Macintyre himself (Ibid). Such an account is articulated in terms of three concepts: social practices, the unity of a human life, and moral traditions. This account identifies the kinds of dispositions necessary not only to achieve 'external goods', such as money, status and power which can be attained through a wide variety of activities (social practices), but also 'internal

goods' which can only be achieved only through specific practices. Ethical practice, from MacIntyre's perspective, requires the pursuit, primarily, of internal goods. The pursuit of human well-being, both our own, and that of the society-at-large, requires this ethical activity.

Research findings

The question is, therefore, what are the implications for this account for the way in which 'employability' is embedded in the curriculum. For straight vocational courses the issue is relatively straightforward and leads to a 'praxeomorphic curriculum' (see Davies, 2003, 2008, 2009). The issues for employer engagement models and for pre-vocational programmes at HE level are more complex, but in different ways. The pre-vocational student is unaware of the employment they will be involved in post-graduation. The employer engagement learner, although engaged in a particular practice, is required to see their activity in distinctively ethical terms. I consider the implications, for academics, for these two types of learners. I argue for, in the first case, the development of an ethical sensibility, an awareness of the nature of internal goods and their implications for the development of virtue, and, in the second case, a clearer articulate of the praxeomorphic curricula.

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