World Academy of Science, Engineering and Technology
International Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences
Vol:6, No:4, 2012

Students, Knowledge and Employability

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***Abstract*—**Citizens are increasingly are provided with choice and customization in public services and this has now also become a key feature of higher education in terms of policy roll-outs on personal development planning (PDP) and more generally as part of the employability agenda. The goal here is to transform people, in this case graduates, into active, responsible citizen-workers. A key part of this rhetoric and logic is the inculcation of graduate attributes within students. However, there has also been a concern with the issue of student lack of engagement and perseverance with their studies. This paper sets out to explore some of these conceptions that link graduate attributes with citizenship as well as the notion of how identity is forged through the higher education process. Examples are drawn from a quality enhancement project that is being operated within the context of the Scottish higher education system. This is further framed within the wider context of competing and conflicting demands on higher education, exacerbated by the current worldwide economic climate. There are now pressures on students to develop their employability skills as well as their capacity to engage with global issues such as behavioural change in the light of environmental concerns. It is argued that these pressures, in effect, lead to a form of personalization that is concerned with how graduates develop their sense of identity as something that is engineered and re-engineered to meet these demands.

***Keywords*—**students, higher education, employability, knowledge, personal development

Open Science Index, Humanities and Social Sciences Vol:6, No:4, 2012 publications.waset.org/12511/pdf

I. Introduction

THE policy discourse surrounding higher education is full of terms that invoke the agency of students – terms such as 'consumers', 'active learners', 'co-producers', 'partners', and the like all allude this connotation. However there is one discourse that has tended to dominate much of the higher education policy agenda in recent years and that is personalisation.

Personalization and the personal have rapidly risen up the agenda within the pedagogical discourse of higher education. This is perhaps unsurprising a mass higher education system in which questions of questions of diversity, difference, and widening participation have taken centre stage. It is also arguable that this focus on the personal is an effective counter to the notion that mass higher education has brought with it mass teaching. However, it is also acknowledged that the notion of personalisation has been imported from the United States and has also associated with changes in a variety of sectors and services to include the notion of customisation. In this regard the users or customers are considered as of utmost importance in the way that products and services can be tailored to their requirements.

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This is encapsulated in the notion of "mass customisation" in terms of the same large number of customers being reached in the mass markets of the industrial economy, and yet simultaneously being treated individually [1]. However, whilst the rhetoric of customisation is couched in terms of meeting individual customer needs there is also an underlying business drive to ensure that this serves to build up a lasting individual relationship with each customer and, thus, to increase customer loyalty and their purchasing power. The application of this commercial model to the new world of market-like public services has of meant a similar tailoring of services to meet individual users' needs.

However, in the world of education there has also been the application of a psychological perspective on personalisation that equates this with improved learning and motivation. The major pedagogical implication of such an approach is the adoption of measures designed to encourage students to be self-learning, self-actualising, and self-initiating. As with customisation, there is an assumption that a homogeneous offering is not sufficient in meeting students' needs. The goal is therefore to employ pedagogies that meet these with an efficiency that is deliverable for a mass higher education system. Yet, despite the emphasis on meeting needs there is also a major driver behind the move towards personalisation: the explicit recognition that mass higher education has led to increased drop-out rates through some students failing to engage sufficiently with their programmes of study. The reasons for this are complex but it is clear that the drive to widen participation has been accompanied by corresponding retention rates. This in turn has led to a focus on the extent to which students can maintain a sustained effort over the course of their studies; their ability to preserve.

Student persistence in 'staying the course' through to graduation cannot easily be pinned down to a narrow set of explanatory factors. There is also the problem of defining what we mean by 'engagement' and 'persistence' in today's mass higher education context. Influential writers such as Ronald Barnett, suggest that the 'will to learn' is a key aspect of the student experience that needs to be encouraged and nurtured [2]. According to this view higher education need to focus on personal aspects such as authenticity, dispositions, inspiration, passion and spirit. Although, this is not a new idea perhaps what Barnett has drawn attention to more than others is how this process is related to an increasingly uncertain age.

In this regard his work chimes to some extent with the zeitgeist of the times; an age of insecurity and risk, of individualism set in relation to appeals to the market-like structures and globalisation where these are valued in and of themselves as an ethic for guiding human action, of constant

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self-reinvention capable of producing greater freedom but also anxiety and depression [3]. This has been exacerbated by the current worldwide economic downturn and the requirement for higher education to be seen to 'deliver' in terms of employability in an increasingly insecure economic and organisational environment. The requirement for graduates to be adaptable and entrepreneurial has therefore never been greater.

However, whilst this age may well be one of uncertainty, Barnett call upon educators in higher education to consider how they can develop curricula and pedagogies that provide students with the qualities to persist, adapt and thrive in this environment. Much of his focus is therefore directed towards how such qualities or attributes can be developed and in doing so this connects with related concepts such as personal development planning (PDP) and graduate attributes (GAs). One of the most influential researchers on GAs is Simon Barrie and his work has had a significant impact on thinking about the nature of generic GAs in higher education. For, example, in developing a conceptual framework for the development of GAs he notes a series of factors including, under the heading of participation: *"generic attributes are learnt by the way students participate and engage with all the experiences of university life"* [4]. It is clear from this work that participation and persistence go hand-in-hand and, of course, are in turn related to course completion and employability. However, the focus on the personal also raises questions for the relationship between students and the curriculum and how in particular they relate to knowledge as a vehicle for developing themselves and their employability. It is to this aspect that I now wish to turn.

II. Graduate Attributes

The 2009 synthesis report from the Global University Network for Innovation (GUNI) entitled *Higher Education at a time of Transformation: New Dynamics for Social Responsibility* draws attention in its introduction to the many challenges confronting the higher education sector that stem from those of wider society: beyond the 'ivory tower' or 'market-oriented university' towards one that innovatively adds value to the process of social transformation [5]. The report argues that this creation and distribution of socially relevant knowledge is something that needs to be core to the activities of universities, thereby strengthening their social responsibility. The report goes on to outline the emerging tensions that bear upon this question and coalesce around a set of interlinked oppositional themes: reactive versus proactive institutions with respect to knowledge paradigms; the knowledge economy versus the knowledge society; universities for the public good or private good; and knowledge relevance versus competitively-driven knowledge. However, the stress on social transformation is also one that equates to personal transformation in terms of the development of GAs. In effect, higher education is viewed as a means towards creating a particular kind of identity.

This move away from the almost exclusive focus on higher education as involving the transmission of knowledge to a growing focus of the learner and the transformational nature of the experience has been a feature of the Scottish system over the last decade. This reform know as the 'Enhancement Themes' approach has led to a range of policy and institutional initiatives that have attempted to modernise the higher education system in light of the increased participation and widening of access. As the name of this approach suggests, the focus is on enhancement as a means of changing and improving the higher education experience. This is based on the view that the student is at the centre of the process and that the focus needs to be on learning experience rather than the traditional focus on pedagogy *per se*. This has lead to series of projects that have shaped the higher education agenda in Scotland in recent years. These include a consideration of the nature and purpose of the First Year; developing employability, changes to assessment practices, responding to students needs, research-teaching linkages, and an over-arching theme 'Graduates for the 21st Century'. Taken together these various themes have gone a considerable way to shaping institutional practices through for example teaching and learning strategies that have impacted upon the learning experience for students.

At present, all twenty one Scottish higher education institutions are currently working on the 'Developing and Supporting the Curriculum' Enhancement Theme which attempts to move the agenda from 'What kind of graduates do we need?' to 'What kind of curricula do we require to enable this?' A major focus of this work is the development of the curriculum in terms of graduate attributes. The aim is therefore to address the development of those qualities that are regarded as key to being able to contribute to the evolving knowledge economy and society that we now live in. The ability to adapt to changing circumstances, to work across knowledge boundaries and to become active and engaged citizens are therefore crucial outcomes for this approach. Examples of such work include: inquiry-based learning as a route to the development of graduate attributes, critical thinking skills modules, changes in assessment practices that involve self and peer assessment, and work-based learning. The eventual aim is to consider a more holistic and unified approach to the development of GAs as a defining aspect of student identity.

However, this approach to higher education reform is not without a number of challenges and tensions with respect to how students consider their identities as being the subject of a process of engineering and re-engineering with respect to graduate attributes. This is, of course, not unique to Scotland, but the strong focus on graduate attributes arguably throws the issue into greater relief. Take the increased diversity of student population resulting from the widening of participation. How can we ensure that this diverse population acquires those graduate attributes that we say are crucial to the purpose of higher education? And how do the varying personal, cultural and economic circumstances of students impact upon the development of these attributes? How do students identify with their place in higher education as *students*, rather than as, for example, consumers who expect a customised service?

What these question raise is the attribution of graduate attributes themselves. Are these attributes something that is part of a justificatory rhetoric within higher education or are they a genuine means to shaping particular kinds of personal identity? And if the latter is the case a further question arises as to how students themselves regard this overt focus on 'engineering the personal' and the notion that they should be engaged in a continual process of re-engineering in light of current economic and even perhaps ideological conditions? In other words, the view that students themselves should internalize a view of personal and individual responsibility with regards to issues of employability and citizenship is one that is profoundly ideological in terms of attribution for actions and accountability. This is all the more acute when considering the discourses that surround the causes, consequences and solutions of the current economic recession.

III. The Problem of Personalisation

Whilst the discourse of personalisation aims to encourage participation and empowerment, it also normalizes the view that individual agency is paramount in terms of personal reflection, planning and decision-making. This trend has not been without its critics who highlighted this trend as an aspect a neoliberal focus on adaptability to 'the market' as a means of social control [6].

The increasing bureaucratisation of the learning process as a codified product is paradoxical when set aside the ways in which students are encouraged to engage with their curricula in a constructivist and personalised manner. It is still further paradoxical that despite the shift towards more participatory co-constructed curricula, students are nonetheless encouraged to engage in a 'guided' customisation of their learning through an assumed reflexive development of GAs. This is legitimated in terms of the notion of flexibility associated with a globalised knowledge economy. Documenting the process in acquiring these attributes has therefore become linked to that of personal development planning (PDP).

The ideological effects of this person-centered discourse concerning PDP is therefore of interest in its own right. As previously noted, whilst on the face of it this discourse may seem personally liberating there are a number of problematic issues that follow on from this inward focus on personal reflection. Such reflection is often touted as a 'good thing' in terms of being reflexively related to the learning process and thereby strengthening engagement and retention. This is taken as developing independence in students so that they can become more autonomous learners and career planners. However, there is an inherent voluntarism in this approach such that wider politico-economic matters that impact upon the individual's experience of the learning process are dissolved into a personalised world that is more than not instrumental in focus.

This tension between the "top-down versus bottom-up" also leads to a range of problematic issues for educators and students alike. These are often political issues concerned with matters such as (i) national, institutional or departmental PDP policies; (ii) access to PDP records; and (iii) academic or vocationally driven. These are issues which can become dissolved in the instantiation of PDP in terms of the overall focus on the need to get such a policy translated into action, and especially via the increasing reliance on virtual learning environments. Learning in this context can become a process of managing information (including personal information) rather than discovery, insight and growth. Thus as some have suggested this has enabled a managerial model of learning to be surreptitiously substituted for the dialogic and critical model which characterises the ideal of learning in higher education [7].

These problematic issues were drawn out an articulated in interviews conducted with staff and students in the social sciences [8]. It became clear that whilst PDP is almost universally accepted in *principle*, the perceptions of implementation raise some problematic *practical* issues. Perhaps this is not to be entirely unexpected given that PDP has to function as a public institutional quality enhancement measure related to such themes as employability, citizenship and the development of GAs, and yet also as something that is private and personal to the student and within her control. It is precisely this tension between the public and private aspects of PDP that is problematic. A discourse focused on personal development is something that is almost universally agreed upon as beneficial in principle, particularly in terms of enhancing employability. However, it is when people come specify what this means in practical curricular and pedagogical terms that problems arise. In other words, there is an abstract notion that PDP *can* lead to improved student engagement, and participation but this is offset by how it is to be managed in actual practice. There seems to be a tension between personal development leading to commitment, engagement and personal growth, and the national imperative that requires knowledge linked to economic wealth creation. It is easy to overplay this apparent divide and they are not independent of each other. Educators and students are both well aware of the inter-twined nature of these aspects of higher education but it is the configuration of PDP as an instrumental process that seems to be most problematic.

It is also the case that with the concept of GAs, the purpose and meaning of higher education qualifications now extends to that of individual behaviour. An individual's personal and social patterns of behaviour have become normalized as part of his or her portfolio of GAs related to 'employability skills'. As noted earlier, this new vocationalist emphasis has been conceptualized as part of a neoliberal discourse in which 'the market' has come to dictate how we view the 'outputs' of higher education. This new rhetoric represents a fundamental change in how higher education is legitimated; one in which it is less in terms of subject specific qualifications and more towards the possession of attributes that equip graduates to respond to the changing nature of the labour market. In this sense the personal is made public and in effect codifies desired individual behaviour resulting from the educational process.

Thus, at one and the same time it can appear that such a focus on the individual represents 'empowerment' whilst also normalizing the notion that it is student that requires to

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measure up to GAs in order to acquire the human capital necessary to meet the demands of a rapidly changing world, and with particular reference to 'the market'. Given that this is now a world of rapid change and uncertainly then these attributes are related to self-competencies that enable strategic 'coping mechanisms' for gaining employment, keeping it, constant re-skilling, and the use of entrepreneurial skills to create new employment. Success is considered in terms of the graduate who is autonomous, self-organizing, self-motivated, self-controlled and able to generate their own opportunities.

It is against this backdrop that PDP has become formalized and bound up with GAs through their assessment and codification. This arguably rationalist process is perhaps more than not about the legitimation of PDP and GAs as a means of *showing* their direct linkage to employability. Thus personalisation and customisation, although driven by the notion of market forces within higher education, runs the risk of objectifying students in a particular way rather than engaging with them.

Is it possible to view personalisation another way; one that has the potential to deliver students who find their studies challenging, even difficult, but who nonetheless persevere and develop themselves?

IV. The Promise of Personalisation

Universities are part-and-parcel of the very fabric of the social and political and economic dimensions that shape our world. They do not stand outside of that world, and therefore the idea that higher education should be concerned with the development of values is in accordance with such a view. If the case for a focus on employability relies on the notion of adaptation to a global knowledge economy and to being in light of current economic conditions, then it can also be argued that an equal case can be made for defending the inclusion of the values that encourage a more global perspective in the curriculum.

It is also the case that GAs are often associated with the notion of creativity and transformation. In this respect it is worth noting Friere's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, in which he draws attention to two diametrically opposed positions on education: (i) as an instrument that is used to facilitate the integration into the logic of the present system, or (ii) a means by people can critically and creatively deal with reality, and to participate in the transformation of their world. [9]

It can be argued that a vision of universities as not only contributing to the sharing of values but also of shaping of them is a desirable goal related to the notion of GAs [10]. It is also the case that there are challenges within higher education in terms of the contradictions inherent in increasing specialisation but also at the same time cross-disciplinary learning and research. This raises the issue of the local-global dimension to graduate attributes and how we begin to develop this so as to encourage students form the outset to consider themselves and their relationship to their studies within a much broader context that lifts the relationship between knowledge and employability to a higher and broader level.

In this regard it is worth pointing out that the framing of teacher-learner relationships and associated rights and responsibilities is a key aspect in relation to learning activity [11]. This, in effect, means the creation of 'deliberate relationships' with students where the nature of rights and responsibilities change over time and through which they can claim greater power. Key features of this are explaining to students how and why their learning activities have been designed, and indeed including them within the construction of the curriculum.

This approach chimes with that of John Mezirow who argues that transformational learning can occur through a process involving a "disorientating dilemma" followed by critical reflection and new interpretations of experience [12]. In applying this to personalisation in higher education the aim should be to encourage students to engage in co-constructing the curriculum in such a way that learners become, in a sense, educational developers and in so doing challenge themselves and explore new possibilities. It is apparent that universities are changing the way learning takes place such lectures are giving way, to some extent, to methods of discovery which yield transformational learning but it is still very much the case that the curriculum is considered as an objective product.

This alternate view of personalisation offers the promise of avoiding the sometimes contrived approaches taken with PDP that attempts to codify the development of GAs. Instead, it is based on a more genuinely reflective means of helping students to engage with their studies and ultimately impact upon their engagement and sense of transformation. In this regard it is clear that this does not equate personalisation with to customisation or with a sense of an engineered identity that lacks engagement and authenticity.

V. Conclusion

The emergence of a discourse of personalization through PDP related GAs has intensified in the world of higher education in recent years. On the face of it, this may at first appear as a welcome development in terms of student engagement and the focus on employability. This has particular resonance in light of the effects of the current economic recession and the legitimation of higher education as being able to able to deliver the sorts of people who are 'adaptable', 'motivated' and 'entrepreneurial' in terms of being able to persevere and thrive in these difficult times. If, after all, the focus of the educational process is 'student-centred' or 'personalized' then, it is argued, this will lead to a greater level of motivation, commitment and self-awareness. This, in turn, is related to a wider curricular and pedagogical framework such as the development of the student identities in terms of GAs.

However, this has created something of a conflicting set of demands on the role of personalisation in higher education and its status as a means to an end in engineering student identities. The focus of higher education has shifted away from knowledge acquisition towards one of personal transformation as a means to wider economic and social transformation. The extent to which students engage with this

process is open to question given that a focus on personal attributes as a publicly accountable matter through PDP and GAs is one that arguably robs the individual of a sense of these attributes as an aspect of subjectivity and authenticity. This is something of a paradoxical aspect to personalisation as developing feature of higher education in which identity has become something of an engineered commodity.

This is set within a rhetoric of the *need* for such an engineered identity so that graduates can change and re-engineer themselves to meet the demands of a rapidly changing knowledge economy and society. There is little doubt that this rhetoric has gained considerable purchase in light of the current economic situation. However, it is arguable that the rhetoric of personalisation has also connected with the notion of an industrialised mode of higher education which is expected to deliver mass customisation in terms of meeting individual students' needs. The current economic climate has called into question the extent to which this is achievable within an ever-tightening envelope of resources. The solution for some has been to adopt an ever greater reliance on a self-service mentality through the adoption of GAs and PDP. However, as this paper has attempted to argue there is a potential educational benefit in focusing on GAs in terms of engaging students with knowledge and the curriculum, and ultimately in improving their employability.

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