

Submissions Abstract Book - All Papers (All Submissions)

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Chaired by Richard Davies

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Undergardeners and stargazers: philosophical perspectives on the purpose of the university.

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Research Domain: Higher education policy (HEP)

Abstract: Philosophy can make no unique claim to be concerned with ‘ultimate purposes’; yet a strong theme in work on higher education (HE) has been its aims and purpose in the contemporary world. This panel considers the language that ought to define a university sector committed to *HE*. It seeks to do some of the hard work of ‘undergardeners’ clearing away the detritus of misconceptions and to be ‘stargazers’ looking towards the majesty of the possible.

Amanda Fulford begins with an exploration of the ‘unsettling’ thought of Thoreau; setting out an alternative conception of ‘endless education’ and unexpected possibilities. Claire Skea and Elizabeth Staddon focus on different conceptions and critiques of HE; namely the development of critical thinking, and consumerism respectively. Martin Gough focusses not on a particular approach to HE, but a critical moment in the life of an academic, the examination of the doctoral thesis.

Paper: Philosophy can make no unique claim to be concerned with ‘ultimate purposes’; yet a strong theme in work on higher education (HE) has been its aims and purpose in the contemporary world (see Barnett, 1988; Lozano et al, 2012; Mendus, 1992). This panel considers the language that ought to define a university sector committed to *HE*. It seeks to do some of the hard work of ‘undergardeners’, to draw on Locke, clearing away the detritus of misconceptions and to be ‘stargazers’, drawing on Kant, looking towards the majesty of the possible just out of reach.

The session asks participants to address three interrelated questions:

1. In what subtle, and tacit ways, does *our* language of HE shape what we think universities ought to achieve?
2. Are some ways of conceiving of HE inappropriate to its mission?

3. Are there sites, and activities within universities which offer an authentic expression of HE?

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An Experiment in Living

There is much talk about the purposes of HE. Often these are discussed in terms of 'economic rationality', evidenced in the emphasis, for example, on the concept of 'employability' that has become rhizomatic. Such language tends to bring such purposes into being. What results is a closure of the possibilities for HE.

While some philosophers have attempted to clarify the aims of higher education and the university (Newman, 1852; Ortega y Gasset, 1930), others have argued against the preoccupation with specifying such ends, arguing instead for the value of 'resolute openness' (Staddon and Standish 2012). Philosophy, it seems, does the work of the undergardener *and* the stargazer.

Here, Amanda Fulford explores the language of purposes for HE through drawing on the work of the essayist and philosopher, Henry David Thoreau. In the opening chapter of *Walden* (1854) Thoreau deliberately plays on the economic language of 'interest', and 'economy' to disrupt what he felt had become the preoccupation New England society, and to propose a different way for how one *accounts* for oneself.

This contribution similarly seeks to unsettle the language of particular purposes of HE, and, drawing on Thoreau, suggests how such language can miss the point: should we enter HE to realise particular ends, or to undergo an experience that opens entirely unexpected possibilities? To do the latter is to embark on what Thoreau calls, an 'experiment in living' (1854).

Cultivating criticality

The need to improve and enhance students' 'academic skills', including critical thinking, is of increasing concern to universities. As we have recently seen with employability, there is now an even greater emphasis placed on explicitly embedding certain skills into the HE curriculum. But what does it mean to be a critical thinker? Can such skills be 'taught'? While there are a number of 'how-to' guides available in this area, covering topics such as critical thinking skills, study skills, and 'skills for success' (Cottrell, 2011), they can be reductive, focusing merely on the cognitive processing required.

Claire Skea will address these questions drawing on the works of Martin Heidegger, particularly his distinction between calculative and meditative ways of thinking. Skea then argues that encouraging students to think critically necessitates a kind of dwelling-with one's knowledge, rather than appraising and evaluating information according to a set formula or procedure. What philosophy of

education adds to this debate around cultivating criticality, which not only consists of a specific set of skills, is a broader conception of thinking itself, as well as a consideration of the university's responsibility to encourage different paths of thought.

Markets and universities

The so-named marketization of HE has consistently been conceived as a threat to the 'higher' purposes of a university education. Market values conflict with educational values, and money values conflict with moral values (illustrations of this dichotomization from within the field of Philosophy of Education include Fulford, 2013).

Elizabeth Staddon will draw from a set of complementary philosophical perspectives that relate to 'world-making practices' (Bell, 2013) in order to explore possibilities for softening or even reconciling these oppositions. Beginning with the idea that 'worlds' are created through symbolic frames of reference rather than through correspondence with what they describe, she considers how terms associated with markets might be configured to include the kinds of values more often associated with higher learning. This exercise requires a history-focused approach to philosophy in order to trace myths, narratives and omissions that shape the contemporary worlds of our making.

The Existential Curiosities of the Doctorate

Why is it that doctoral examiners often find candidates' written dissertations come up short in terms of expressing a coherent thesis, yet in the viva they both brings it to life and into shape? Many tensions are evident in this situation: articulated propositions vs practice (of the discipline); candidate vs dissertation; dissertation (writing dead on the page) vs *viva-voce* (living voice). The tensions are not unique to PhD but are especially acute. Which one of each duality is really being assessed?

The PhD is, in the academic career, the zenith of freedom to explore and articulate one's own contribution. There are problems in exercising this freedom, some through external constraints but also to do with a flight from freedom, in 'anguish' (Sartre 1958). This provides a clue to the above problems in how candidates for assessment express themselves, and further in how examiners balance the influences of phonocentrism and grammatocentrism. Diagnosing the roots of these problems requires critical analyses of the Platonic, the Post-Structuralist and the Sartrian views of writing.

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