Reframing the employ(dis)ability agenda in HE and why a crude skills acquisition model fails everyone (0190)

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Over the last decade, the H.E. sector has become consumed by the employability agenda to the extent that it has become what Antonio Gramsci would call commonsense. The reaction to the employability agenda has been mixed and brought to the fore questions about the raison d'etre of H.E institutions, the reasons why individuals may wish to go to university and how we support students in maximizing their potential. The agenda currently relates to two predominant spheres of debate.   The first sphere focuses on the employment opportunities of the student following graduation and the second relates to the development of skills, knowledge and abilities of students along the learning journey. This paper focuses on the latter of these areas.   In the 1990s there was a considerable drive to embed the language of skills into the curriculum and this was evident in the Dearing Report and reinforced in comment emerging from the CBI. The debate has since broadened to include recognition of attributes, however, the authors argue that this is still too narrow a perception of the learning process and of the employability agenda. Moreover, an agenda based on skills development is arguably flawed and in need of greater scrutiny.

One could argue that the skills based approach, at the very heart of the employability agenda in H.E, is indeed a deficit model focusing on drawing out and highlighting weakness rather than maximizing strengths. Nonetheless, it is seductive and difficult to challenge because it, too, is framed as commonsense. The skills agenda has become central to university approaches to employability, however, one could suggest that a foundation based on skills is at best unhelpful and at worst detrimental and unsustainable.   The skills agenda is problematic for a range of reasons.   Central to concerns is the assumption that a given predetermined set of graduate skills can determine success and override prejudice that may be based on ethnicity, gender, disability, class or age (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1964; Collins, 1979). That is to say that skills are far from being a leveler in society. Placing such blind faith in the skills based employability agenda implies that society is meritocratic and "represents a classic example of 'blaming the victim' (those who cannot find jobs)" (Brown, Hesketh & Williams, 2003). Moreover, it should be noted that the university from where a degree was obtained can equally be a variable in an employer-driven labour market.

The authors suggest that greater consideration needs to be given to a strengths-based learning model that puts the student at the centre of the learning process in a more meaningful way. This involves a shift in attitudes and move away from the often unquestioning commitment to an agenda based on skills acquisition and development.   The increasingly dominant constructivist approach to learning and teaching has generated significant strides in emphasizing the centrality of the student and we are witnessing a move away from a simplistic model of imparting knowledge towards a model where the student is able to actively construct knowledge and even negotiate the curriculum. However, as universities become more business-facing, there is a danger that students will, firstly, no longer be the sole 'customer' and secondly, may be misled in thinking that a degree programme based on developing a package of skills can outweigh potential challenges to employment.

There has been a significant cultural shift in the sector with greater focus on the need to develop students' employability. To some extent the cultural shift has emerged as a result of pressure placed on VCs by policy makers, who present the agenda in terms of 'survivability'

or as a zero-sum game.   The shift in priorities of HEIs has been further driven by the growing power of the business sector and the desperation of the government to build a strong, economic base.   The agenda has been framed as commonsense, however, the debate embodies assumptions about a H.E. sector, which is not monolithic and does not necessarily see itself as existing to serve the economy. The discourse of employability has certainly become prevalent and has led universities to develop employability strategies in the quest to produce, or be seen to produce, the ultimate 'employable' graduate.   The focus has been further reinforced by the employability league table measure that has entered university rankings offered by the Sunday Times, for example.

The dominant discourse suggests that there is a skills shortage and that the H.E. sector in some way bears a degree of responsibility.   Employers have been quoted in the media as saying that graduates are not 'oven-ready' and do not have the level of skills that the economy demands.   Moreover, the sector is being called upon to address the gap by 'producing' graduates that have the required skills, whatever they may be.   Clearly, the danger of the discourse is that it can subtly promote the repositioning of academics as trainers rather than educators. Furthermore, there can be additional repercussions which may be even more damaging. For example, the Welsh Assembly Government in July 2010 argued for a restructuring of H.E provision in the country on the basis that there is too much competition between institutions. The irony, however, is that the emerging drive is forcing institutions to capitulate to a model of promoting both degrees and graduates as saleable products.

The employability agenda represents a form of commonsense that is socially, culturally and historically situated and therefore there is limited scope to radically change the agenda in the short-term.   However, the authors argue that the focus on skills is unsustainable and constructs a flawed model of employability in a H.E context. The employability agenda has been couched in the language of skills, however, such a model assumes that any student can develop any given skill set and excel in that area. The authors suggest that an alternative strengths-based approach would offer the student an opportunity to identify and develop their strengths and talents in a sustainable way, rather than simply focus on remedying their weaknesses.

Bibliography

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