

‘What is the value of knowledge in the context of contemporary higher education?’ (0203)

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Traditionally universities were perceived as elite environments in which the pursuit of knowledge as an intellectual exercise occurred, and only the chosen few could gain access (Laurillard 2002). Yet in the contemporary context of UK higher education (HE) questions have been posed about their purpose, as institutions widen participation and massify, allowing access to individuals, who may not have had such a choice in the past to undertake courses of study. This expansion in recruitment is paralleled by the increasing diversity of what can be studied and modularisation. Moreover, HEIs increasingly adopt economic principles and ‘quality’ equates to the value of a qualification relative to its impact on the economy, measured (in part) in terms of graduates’ success in securing employment.

The conference title suggests that ‘knowledge’ has somehow been ‘lost’ as a result of these shifts and seeks the wisdom that has eroded alongside this loss. Arguably, knowledge in the traditional sense was constituted as intellectualism for its own sake, yet the introduction of undergraduate degrees in nursing and paramedical training, to name just two in the vocational realm, is indicative of the kinds of changes that HE has encountered bringing with it new challenges and demands. What good is philosophy if you are trying to lance a boil?

These changes raise questions about the purpose of HE: is the intellectualism of old losing currency in the contemporary context and if so what is replacing it?

A common concern is whether HE has altered its primary focus, moving from teaching (and learning) the ‘hard skills’ imbued in ‘orthodox’ disciplinary knowledge, to generic or ‘soft’ skills, i.e. those that can be transferred from one context to another (Leitch 2006). This argument is gaining increasing currency as employability moves up policy agendas, both within the sector and the workplace (Yorke 2006; Langlands 2010; Snook 2010). Indeed in the context of nursing, practical and problem solving skills must be foregrounded. Thus a definitive answer to the question of what constitutes knowledge and wisdom is obscured.

Arguably, soft skills have *always* been a fundamental aspect of learning (and teaching) in higher education, whatever the discipline, because demonstration of ideas and understandings *necessitates* the use of generic skills for effective communication. If the top skills required by employers are effective communication and team work (Yorke 2006), surely acquiring the knowledge and wisdom for self progression is a valuable commodity? Indeed employers are now more likely to assess candidates than qualifications, placing transferrable skills at the forefront of employer's agendas (BBC News 6th July 2010).

A survey conducted with 694 employers, of 2.4 million employees, suggests that numeracy, literacy and ICT are fundamental requirements for successful transitions from HE into the workplace (Snook 2010). Snook (2010) argues that learning programmes are more effective if they have a practical context, particularly for those on vocational routes. He reports that 81% of employers believe skills for employability should be the priority for higher education, an indication that generic skills should no longer viewed as secondary in HE perhaps?

As more and more graduates take up employment in roles unrelated to the discipline they studied in HE (Woods 2010), these questions need to be aired, particularly as competition for entry into university continues to increase despite this issue (BBC News July 2010).

Many graduates, if they can secure a job, will go on to work in careers that make use of the additional skills that have been acquired en route rather than disciplinary knowledge. Moreover, as 77% of employers of graduates in the business sector place greater emphasis on generic skills, such as problem solving (Snook 2010:38), it seems that a rethink is judicious.

Students may attend university for a variety of reasons but, in general, they expect the outcome to be increased employability prospects. In the current climate of increased competition for entry with no guarantee of employment in their chosen field, if at all, HEIs face the challenge of creating opportunities for students to graduate with a composite skills-set, of the kind that appears attractive to employers. However, in universities where cohorts comprise large numbers from Widening Participation contexts and recruit from diverse entry routes, applicants may lack the requisite skills for study at an HE level so opportunities to access developmental support in this area should be prioritised.

Arguably, this is where the hard skills versus soft skills debate juxtaposes and questions of knowledge and wisdom warrant resituating, for the kinds of knowledge that students *need* are inextricably linked to the messages policy makers must heed, *wisely*, and these appear to be coming from outside of the academy. By identifying the strategies necessary to support the development of generic skills, what passes for knowledge in HE begins to be discernible from conventional understandings. This is not to say that knowledge has been lost, rather that renewed knowledge, based on current wisdom, needs to be mobilised to meet the challenges.

In this context, the knowledge and wisdom that institutions need to mobilise should, ideally, be applied *within* disciplines (Myers and Gibson 2010) but may need to be supported with extracurricular activities. Moreover, institutions need to recognise which skills are most relevant and valued and facilitate opportunities for their development (Allibone and Ibsen 2010), by integrating sustained opportunities both horizontally and vertically across the student life cycle. The idea of focussing on process rather than merely product is not a new one (Ramsden 1992; Biggs 2006), however its adoption has been slow in arriving, particularly when such an approach is likely to equip students with the knowledge and wisdom they can make most use of when they graduate.

Ultimately though, responsibility for redesigning curriculum to facilitate mutual learning and teaching opportunities rests with individual lecturers, but how does this square with traditional academics who consider their role to be transmission of disciplinary content?

Perhaps it doesn't, which arguably poses the greatest challenge.

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