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Internationalism in an age of insularity: constructions of 'global citizenship' in English university strategic policy documents (0525)

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Abstract

'Global citizenship' has become ubiquitous within university strategic plans in recent years, but it remains an ill-defined idea, with multiple and conflicting conceptualisations. These documents represent a discourse between the university, students, government and wider society, being part of the framing of what the former believes, offers and expects in an era when ideas of internationalism are being contested.

This paper will explore the ways in which English universities use the term 'global citizenship' in defining their mission through a content analysis of their strategic plans. It engages with calls from the research community for more interrogation of the links between stated mission and pedagogic practice, as well as addressing questions about the normative assumptions made about students' motivations for entering higher education. More broadly, it explores the societal purposes of contemporary universities in a period of social upheaval.

Paper

Over the last fifteen years, 'global citizenship' has been widely adopted into the policy and practice of English higher education and valorised as a desirable element of what a university is able to offer students and wider society. However, its meaning is notoriously 'slippery', with several researchers demonstrating how it has been used to describe very different philosophies or processes (e.g. Oxley and Morris, 2013; Schultz, 2007), including:

- *Neoliberal* – knowledge and skills for instrumentalist entry to the global graduate labour market, characterised by working abroad and/or within multinational corporations and organisations;
- *Pluralist/transformational* – an expansive worldview built around dismissing ethnocentrism, respecting cultural diversity and striving for positive intercultural interactions whether in the home country or abroad;
- *Problem-focused* – stressing engagement with global issues (e.g. climate change or epidemic disease) to develop solutions, often collaboratively with the affected communities;
- *Critical/radical* – understanding and challenging existing power structures and global injustice, with a focus on emancipation and equality.

Despite this conceptual complexity, global citizenship has rapidly become a ubiquitous feature of university strategic plans. Clifford and Montgomery (2014, p.28) note that ‘universities are beginning to include the term global citizen in their policy documents [but] the extent to which this might influence the goals and curricula of higher education is yet to be realised’, while Lilley, Barker and Harris (2015, p.957) argue that ‘while the “idea” of educating global citizens appears in university discourse, there is limited evidence demonstrating how the “idea” of the global citizen translates into practice’. Furthermore, Harrison (in press) questions the extent to which global citizenship is something to which all students aspire.

As formal public documents, strategic plans constitute a discourse about the purpose and priorities of the university. They document how the university constructs its relationship with wider society (including prospective students and employers), but they also establish the expectations that are held about internal practices. With respect to global citizenship, they provide a framing for curriculum and pedagogy that influences what is valued and what is considered possible for and by teaching staff, albeit that Ball (2014) argues that policy documents are messy, multivocal and contingent, rather than necessarily authoritative and planned positionings.

This paper will report the results of a content analysis of the strategic plans of all 101 English universities for which one is made publicly available – this is currently ongoing at the time of writing, but will be completed by autumn 2018. The research questions being addressed are:

1. In what ways do English universities construct global citizenship through their publicly-available strategic plans?
2. What do their embedded discourses about global citizenship tell us about how they perceive their missions with respect to students, employers and wider society?
3. What are the implications for the curriculum, pedagogy and other forms of practice?

The content analysis is being undertaken through a deep reading of the documents with respect to the following dimensions: (a) The conceptualisation of global citizenship that is stated or can be inferred, (b) whether global citizenship is viewed as a process or an endpoint, (c) how global citizenship is related to specific curricula or pedagogic practices, (d) what normative assertions are made about students/graduates with respect to global citizenship, and (e) how global citizenship articulates with other elements of the university’s mission.

The analysis will be informed by the theoretical lens of ‘prospective pedagogic identities’ (Bernstein, 2000) which will be used to examine how students and graduates are constructed with respect to the dominant values within the higher education sector and wider society. It will also take account of the potential neo-colonial nature of discourses around global citizenship, which are dominant in ‘Western’ nations, but which may be alien or antagonistic elsewhere in the world.

Initial findings suggest that universities are using the concept of global citizenship in markedly different ways to signal what they believe, what they do and what they are seeking to achieve. There is seemingly little recognition that multiple conceptualisations might exist, with the term

rarely being unpacked or problematised – rather it is an ill-defined, but intrinsically ‘good’, thing that universities should ‘do’. Furthermore, it is often unclear whether global citizenship is viewed as a graduate outcome, a process of becoming or a series of curricular or extra-curricular experiences.

The paper will present a tentative typology of universities based around the content of their strategic plans and their wider institutional missions and status within the sector, concluding with a discussion around the implications for universities and educators in light of neo-nationalist trends across Europe and wider world.

References

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