

Submissions Abstract Book - All Papers (All Submissions)

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What a university is for? Management degree apprenticeships

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Abstract: This paper explores the way in which universities are interpreted by those involved in new degree apprenticeships in management at 2 UK universities. Data was collected from private sector partners, professional body representatives, apprentices and university staff, all involved in new degree apprenticeships in management. Views were collected as part of a qualitative study, carried out over 12 months, which involved quarterly semi-structured interviews plus reflective logs and progress reports. In exploring their views of the delivery of new workplace-focused curriculum, the study raises questions about the role of higher education and its underlying 'worth' or purpose. . Over the period of data collection, apprentices' view of the university changed. While they began by seeing the university as being mainly a route to the final degree more cheaply than the alternatives, they came to describe the institution as a source of knowledge and of broader ideas and opportunities. Private sector, university staff, however, and professional body representatives emphasised the compliance role of the university

Paper:

Introduction

This paper explores how universities are perceived by those involved in new degree apprenticeships in management at 2 UK universities. Through massive forces of economic, technological and social change (Barnet, 2015) universities have changed to take on new 'missions' against which the university is measured and evaluated. While universities generally have a high level of social support, "different constituents support universities for different reasons and infuse them with different values" leading to "diverse expectations on what their mission should be" (Seeger et al, 2019, 231). Further, apprenticeships require high levels of cooperation and evaluation externally (Mulkeen et al, 2019). This study offers a range of different perspectives, not based on philosophy (Wyatt, 1990) but on participation in new curriculum of what a university is 'for'.

Background

The role of the university in society has been much debated, with the adoption of new public management (NPM) and academic capitalism supporting 'massification' of education in the modern

university (Barnett, 2015; Minogue, 2017). This was seen as departing from academic knowledge and freedom of thought, with problems in traditional institutions in their adoption of NPM (Barnet, 2017; Slaughter and Leslie, 1997) More recent researchers have questioned the impacts that increasing levels of external (and internal) monitoring, quality assurance and evaluation have on academic freedom and the pursuit of knowledge (Jarvis 2014; Minogue, 2017; O’Byrne & Bond 2014)

The context for this paper is new degree apprenticeships in the UK, introduced as part of “many overlapping UK government policy initiatives in the last 5 years, changing curriculum, research and knowledge” (Martin et al, 2018, 2). Degree apprenticeships meet market skills needs, combining practical experience and workplace skills with theoretical knowledge (Rowe et al, 2016) through collaboration, cooperation and co-creation between employers, universities, professional bodies and students (Mulkeen et al, 2019). To understand how the university role was understood in this process, a qualitative study was carried out in two universities with established degree apprenticeship programmes in management.

Method

Over 12 months, data was collected from 12 private sector partners, 2 professional body representatives, 24 apprentices and 6 university staff, all involved in new degree apprenticeships in management in two institutions via three semi-structured interviews plus reflective logs and progress reports. Transcripts were then analysed and themes emerged, showing how participants understood the university role in apprenticeship delivery over the year.

Discussion of findings
 The key roles of the university were seen by participants, in order, as:
 1. Ensuring standards are met
 2. Being a source of knowledge and theory
 3. Being a resource base (eg, for rooms etc, for young people and for library access)

As seen in Table 1, by far the most common response was that the university was there for standard keeping and compliance. This was unchanging for private sector partners and figured largely in other replies.

For apprentices, however, the emphasis shifted from compliance to see universities in terms of knowledge and theory. Hence over the period of data collection, apprentices’ view of the university changed. While they began by seeing the university as being mainly a route to the final degree more cheaply than the alternatives, they came to describe the institution as a source of knowledge and of broader ideas and opportunities. Private sector and professional body representatives emphasised the compliance role of the university throughout the programme with this typical remark by a private sector manager.

“They could really just be here the whole time as the university stuff is just a distraction; still they need it for assignments” (Business Manager, with 2 apprentices)

Table 1	Outset	Midway	End	Additional
Apprentices	Ensure standards are met	Knowledge and theory	Knowledge and theory	
Private sector partners	Ensure standards are met	Ensure standards are met	Ensure standards are met	Ensure standards are met

met	Source	of	resources	and	facilities
Professional bodies	Knowledge and theory	Ensure standards are met	Ensure standards are met		
Source	of	resources	and	facilities	
University staff	Ensure standards are met	Knowledge and theory	Ensure standards are met		

In exploring their views of the delivery of new workplace-focused curriculum, the study raises questions about the role of higher education and its underlying ‘worth’ or purpose. This emphasis on standards and assessments reflects issues raised by Sugrue and Solbrekke, (2017) and suggests that for many participants, the university was there as a compliance tester as the knowledge created and shared by universities was not seen as key in the new curriculum. Hence knowledge as a key facet of the university (Sutphen et al, 2018) was less well appreciated by all participants except apprentices. University staff themselves focused on standards and when the idea of knowledge was raised, often downplayed it

“Well we’re really here ... to keep up standards...” (Apprenticeship Lecturer HE1)

“We do cover the same knowledge base as in the ordinary degree but it’s supplementing the workplace... apprentices see their practical experience as most important” (Apprenticeship Lecturer HE2)

Rather than doing so, however, apprentices valued the learning experience highly

“It’s about making sense of how the organisation works ... and the knowledge the university gives you helps you to think ... you recognise a theory working in practice..”(Apphe2)

“You learn a lot in this company and it helps you to do your job but the university really helps you see things ... to think...”(Apphe1).

Summarising, the views of the role of the university in these awards reflected instrumental rather than intellectual needs, despite the value placed on knowledge by the apprentices themselves. This suggested difficulties for university staff in valuing their contribution and lack of emphasis by the university on the worth of the knowledge involved in the degree. If the university is to place knowledge at the heart its mission, then it seems that this message needs to be clear, even when working in unfamiliar contexts. If universities are seen only as auditors of achievements, then the worth of higher education is necessarily altered. More research is needed to test these questions and explore what modern universities are for.

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