

Submissions Abstract Book - All Papers (All Submissions)

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Is 'hypothetically speaking' leading us astray?

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Abstract: Universities find themselves defined by *evaluation*. Across a range of frameworks, surveys, and league tables the reoccurring effort is to be 'high quality'. In this paper I do not want to consider another alternative reading of quality but rather explore the formulation of the problem itself. I defend three propositions:

1. That the present debate is marked, by most of those involved, as requiring articulation in the form of a *hypothetical*. By this I mean that the debate is of the form '*If X then Y*'.
2. That there exist in natural languages 'functional concepts'. Such concepts are not susceptible to the naturalistic fallacy and as such descriptions of instances of these concepts give rise to evaluations as to their 'goodness' or 'badness'.
3. That whilst not all of universities' activities are articulated in functional concepts, central aspects relating to students and knowledge generation are.

Paper: More than ever universities find themselves *evaluated*. Across a range of frameworks, surveys, websites and league tables the reoccurring effort is to be 'high quality' (see for example, Skelton, 2005; Brown and Carasso, 2013) It has become commonplace for academics to show both 'high quality', whilst at the same time to question what this actually means. In this paper I do not want to revisit this debate with another alternative reading of quality or the possibility of measuring different universities by the same instruments. Rather, I will explore the formulation of the problem itself. I want to develop and defend three propositions:

1. That the present debate is marked, by most of those involved, as requiring articulation in the form of a *hypothetical*. By this I mean that the debate is of the form '*If X then Y*'. The debate largely reduces to what X, and what Y will achieve X.
2. That there exist in natural languages 'functional concepts'. Such concepts are not susceptible to the naturalistic fallacy and as such descriptions of instances of these concepts give rise to evaluations as to their 'goodness' or 'badness'.
3. That whilst not all of universities' activities are articulated in functional concepts, central

aspects relating to students and knowledge generation are. As such this gives an evaluation of universities from descriptions of its practice, rather than requiring agreement on normative accounts of what a university ought to be.

The present debate

In order to simplify the argument slightly I begin with a claim that the present debate in relation to higher education is characterised by three perspectives and their detractors: (i) quality depends on what core stakeholders, namely students and employers, want; (ii) quality depends on the public policy outputs the state requires, and (iii) quality depends on what a university has traditionally been. The first reflects the *student as consumer* approach to the university, though, as is clear in discussion, *student* operates as a proxy for parents, employers and a range of other actors (see Cheng, 2016). The second reflects the ways in which universities are required to align their activities not only to the various excellence frameworks developed by the state, but a range of other policy agendas operant in the quasi-governmental arena, for example Access and Participation agreements. The third focusses on what universities have traditionally been for, and how they are still able to contribute in various ways to society, humanity, civilisation, etc.

All three approaches set out a particular set of 'X's that the universities ought to ensure, and to articulate the relationship that ought to exist between X and Y. Often this is in the form of 'what works' or 'evidence-based practice', but also in the form of a commitment to 'the practicum' in which the student is apprenticed into a vocational area. Detractors, rather than question this formulation, seek to replace the X with, from their perspective, more palatable aims.

Functional concepts

MacIntyre (1985) in his application of Aristotelianism to contemporary issues develops the idea of 'functional concepts'. Such concepts do not fall victim to Moore's (1903) *naturalistic fallacy*, itself a version of Hume's (1738) rejection of deriving an 'ought' from an 'is'. This fallacy argues that you cannot define good (or excellences) in reductive terms from the natural properties of things. In rejecting the fallacy, MacIntyre identifies a number of examples of functional concepts. The goodness of *a wristwatch* can be derived, he claims, from easily assessed natural properties such as its weight and its ability to correctly tell the time. A watch that is heavy and does not consistently tell the right time is, by dint of these properties, a bad watch. MacIntyre develops the idea through examples of 'the farmer' and 'a person' both of which he identifies as functional concepts. It does not follow from MacIntyre's analysis that all concepts are *functional concepts*, nor does he give a systematic account of how one, in practice, identifies functional concepts. What is clear, however, is that they are related to a teleological view of the world. At the heart of this vision is the journey of the person-as-they-are to the person-they-ought-to-be; a teleological vision which is *necessarily* central to education.

Re-describing the search for quality in higher education

Given the word limitations, I will exemplify the potential of functional concepts by considering one example: 'student'.

The concept 'student' can be developed in two ways: as an institutional role, or as an identity (see Davies, 2013). The institutional role is, in a virtuous society, parasitic on the identity concept. By this I mean, and have argued elsewhere, that an institution in establishing a role of student *ought* to do so

in order for individuals to embody the identify of a student. The concept student is relational in respect to: bodies of knowledge, and/or those with mastery in the area the individual wishes to study. Thus, one can be a 'student of philosophy' or a 'student of Dr. so and so'. As such a student is seeking to become better at something – understanding a body of knowledge, or a particular set of skills, etc. In order to do so they recognise that they need to 'apply themselves' to the task, to draw on the etymology of 'student', and perhaps painstakingly so. Further, they recognise this will involve change and improvement. These dispositions are, literally, *what it means to be a student*.

- Aspiring to be better at something
- Open to being changed by the process
- Recognising that application is required

As a functional concept, the lack of these leads directly to the evaluation of being 'a bad student', and a university that does not promote these dispositions 'a bad university'. This does not require the formulation of hypotheticals. There is no X to be discussed or open to alternative consideration. Of course one can decide not to be 'a student' (perhaps becoming a trainee), but if one does then the demands are clear.

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