

The First Year: Back to the future

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Introduction

This paper builds on the earlier discussion in the Enhancement Themes publication *First things first: the first year in Scottish higher education*, which sets out how the Graduates for the 21st Century Theme is leading to a re-evaluation of the First Year and its purpose. It is evident that there is considerable innovative work going on in the sector that is linking the development of graduate attributes with employability and a broader citizenship agenda through the vehicle of personal development planning. These developments were placed in a wider global context within the paper in terms of the ever-evolving and fast-paced knowledge society and economy. This paper returns to the theme, but this time with a focus on the distinctive nature of Scottish higher education in this global context, and considers some of the ways in which this may play out. It therefore offers a vision for the direction of this Theme in the coming years, and indeed more broadly for the Graduates for the 21st Century project as a whole. This is very likely to be all the more important for the short to medium term in a period during which funding models will be under scrutiny and pressure, and where a clear and robust justification for the way in which Scottish higher education operates will need to be articulated. This is all the more acute with regard to the nature and purpose of the first year within the common four-year degree structure.

Considering the past

I want to examine how we can refresh and refocus the first year in Scottish higher education institutions by thinking about how we can take the Graduates for the 21st Century Theme forward while looking to the past. This may seem a little odd but there is much to be learned from past tradition in the Scottish higher education system that we can adapt to the requirements of the 21st century. This tradition stretches back to the post-Enlightenment nature of Scottish universities; an era of the 'democratic intellect' (Davie, 1961). George Elder Davie examined the decline of a type of higher education offered in Scottish universities after the Enlightenment of the eighteenth century which encouraged breadth of study and a commitment to public engagement through the study of philosophy and a broader concern with theoretical and conceptual issues. However, even today, the notion of a broad higher education, at least to begin with in the early part of a programme of study, is still with us in many of Scotland's four-year degree programmes.

Davie advanced the argument that the democracy of the democratic intellect lay in the way in which the generalism of the Scottish philosophical tradition acted as a barrier to an individualistic notion of learning and in so doing bridged the gap between the expert few and lay majority. It was argued that this created a sort of 'intellectual bridge' between all classes in which the Scottish intelligentsia remained in touch with its popular roots, thereby



retaining a strong sense of social responsibility. Davie argued that a 'common sense' developed in which the expert knowledge of individuals was enhanced by, and held accountable to, the understanding of the wider public. This was 'democratic' in as much as there was a social distribution of intellectual knowledge. This notion of the 'democratic intellect' therefore runs contrary to that of intellectual elites and rule by experts. It is a perspective on intellectuality in terms of the social function of the academics in universities. However, as Barr (2006) rightly points out, this was very much a male experience and one in which there is more than a little mythology surrounding the relationship between the classes.

In more modern times universities often legitimate their purpose in terms of the 'employability' of their graduates. While this is a necessary aspect of higher education, it tends to overshadow the idea of citizenship and the democratisation of knowledge. In other words, a case can be made that we should not simply strive to develop a sense of expertise, but also that it is important that we help our students bring 'knowledge from below' in terms of forging a real connection with lived experience. To do otherwise might risk a lack of engagement with higher education, or view it as something at a distance from ordinary life and everyday practices. As Lyotard put it in *The Postmodern Condition* we court an 'exteriorization of knowledge with respect to the "knower", at whatever point he or she may occupy in the knowledge process.' (1984, p 4). There is a particular danger here in the first year given that the widening participation agenda has led to a more diverse entrant body of students. This has meant that we need to be able to contextualise knowledge in more meaningful ways that connect students' experiences. This is all the more important with respect to the current global economic situation and the imperative placed on higher education to 'deliver' on employability. In this regard creating and communicating have become just as important as knowing.

Considering the present

At present all 20 Scottish higher education institutions are currently working on the Graduates for the 21st Century Enhancement Theme which attempts to consolidate and build on the previous Themes. A major focus of this work is the development of graduate attributes in terms of the qualities that graduates acquire during the course of their learning. These qualities are key to being able to contribute to the evolving knowledge economy and society that we now live in. The ability to adapt to changing circumstances, to work across knowledge boundaries and to become active and engaged citizens are therefore crucial outcomes for this approach (Arthur and Bohlin, 2009).

However, there are two fundamental interlinked questions that confront the sector and which impact on the democratisation of higher education. The first is whether the move towards a mass higher education system has led to a diminution of the lecturer-student and student-student experience, or if you will the essentially relational and human side of the higher education experience. The second issue is whether bureaucratisation and codification of the learning and assessment process has become something of an objective in and of itself through, for example, various strategy documents and policies. The extent to which these translate into actual practice and reflects the reality of being a student in higher education in the 21st century is a moot point. For example, in a study of institutional teaching and learning strategies, Smith (2008) points out how the student is likely to appear in the object position of a clause than the subject position. In other words, 'the student' is objectified in a particular way as being on the receiving end of some activity rather than as an active participant. This, in effect, subordinates the role of the student as an agent and thereby reduces the empowerment of being in the subject position. This kind of analysis raises questions about whether teaching and learning strategy discourses are to some degree or other rhetorical texts, disengaged from the very people they are about. This is not to suggest that these should not be in place or are not of value, but rather that there is a danger that they can lead to a depersonalisation of the institutional enhancement of teaching and learning practices. It is social actors who engage with each other as part-and-parcel of these practices rather than an objectified personification of institutions themselves. As Newton (2000, p 157) points out, a discourse about empowerment is not always necessarily empowering. Therefore the focus on graduate attributes needs to be one that students can identify with. As Smith puts it:



Discourse, as Trowler et al. (2005, page 444) note, is 'socially generated and used. It both limits and enables thought and actions, structuring the way projects and tasks are conceived, discussed and pursued'. If we shape our discourse, the situation will be shaped; if we are engaged, empowered and motivated by the discourse of learning and teaching, we will breathe life into its strategies. (Smith, 2008, p 405)

If I may now turn to the first year in particular, it is evident that the nature and purpose of this stage in Scottish higher education has undergone considerable change in recent years. There is little doubt that the previous First Year Enhancement Theme has gone some way in enabling a shift in how we treat students at this level in the light of widening participation. Much of this has been aimed at helping first year entrants to consider themselves as 'apprentice students' in terms of confidence building, developing good study habits, and learning how to become independent learners. These are issues that we have faced in common with other countries in the world who have also witnessed an expansion and diversification of entrants through a widening of participation. In this respect this is an international issue and there is much to be learned from colleagues in other parts of the world. For example, in an excellent paper that summarises the key factors and interventions in enabling success in the first year, Wilson (2009) draws upon her experience as First Year Advisor at Griffith University in Australia. Without wishing to repeat the points made in the article, it is evident that many of these interventions are targeted in terms of levels application; from all students (for example via induction) to 'at risk' groups (for example prevention of failure through specific support mechanisms such as peer mentoring). However, the nature of these various interventions is now well known and as Wilson points out we have now reached a point where:

The strategy of bootstrap innovation (viz., let's try this and see what happens) has...served us well in the early stages, but we now know enough to use more considered approaches to driving change. The alternative is to continue to reinvent the wheel and feel increasingly tired doing it. (Wilson, 2009, p 16)

There is a tie-in here with the sub-theme of 'Students' Needs' and how we tailor our interventions in such a way as to help students adjust and thrive on entering the higher education environment. This has never been more acute given the diversity of students who now enter the first year, but it is often apparently small-scale and more 'human' day-to-day interventions that can make all the difference to success or failure for some students. This was the topic of one of Graduates for the 21st Century project workshops which took place at Queen Margaret University in session 2009-10 entitled 'Little Things that make the Difference'. It was evident that both teaching and non-teaching staff have a crucial role to play in 'humanising' the higher education experience. Four key points were repeatedly raised by the participants at this seminar with regard to personalisation:

- **Knowing the student**, that is, knowing the students to talk to in terms of their name and something of their background and motivation. Not easy to achieve in a mass higher education system but a key point in terms of talking to students at a 'human' level (for example before lectures begin, at the end of class, time permitting, in open spaces/coffee areas).
- **Learning how to be a student**, for example, with regard to assessment it was suggested that students need to learn (for example via tutorials) how to interpret feedback on coursework. Of course this also has an implication for staff: how to write useful and constructive feedback. Another issue raised under this theme was that of helping students to reflect on their learning styles (for example via personal development planning, although not exclusively via e-portfolios which some students may not engage with). Finally, there was considerable support for the idea of helping students to understand that they can learn from each other, that it is a collaborative enterprise. Various ideas were discussed in relation to this issue in terms of peer support and collaborative assessment practices.
- **A degree of choice of content and assessment**, in terms of the idea that the student is to some degree in control of their own learning and that **their** learning outcomes can be a driver rather than pre-packaged for them. This also carried over into the issue of assessment in terms of linking up with learning styles. The contentious issue here is how far this extends – who decides what is learned and how it is assessed?
- **Structural issues**, that allow for greater personalisation and flexibility, for example, with respect to timetabling, or exemptions for prior learning.



It is interesting to note that the first two of these focus on issues of relationships whereas the other two equate personalisation with customisation. It is clear that in the current economic environment, customisation is much less likely to be achievable. However, the main point is that this kind of integration between the sub-themes is worth pursuing.

In turning to the issue of how we foster the development of graduate attributes, there is still the question of how these relate to the first year in the Scottish higher education system. This is not to try and extol the virtues of some specifically 'tartan attributes' but rather to contextualise these within the predominately four-year honours degree system. These attributes cannot be considered within isolation but are very much related to other factors that impinge upon the higher education system in Scotland. For example, there has been a tendency towards a blurring at the edges between secondary, further and higher education. Advanced Higher grades have been with us for some time and in some, albeit limited cases, permit advanced entry into degree programmes in Scotland, as do the possession of particular configurations of 'A' Levels. With the introduction of *Curriculum for Excellence* there will be an inevitable impact on what entrants to the first year come with in terms of their exposure to a more personalised and interdisciplinary curriculum. The extent to which this will impact upon the design of the first year and the possibility of a more integrative approach to advanced entry remains an open question. Furthermore, there has also been a widening of entry to include students from various routes in further education. This has sometimes led to disparities in admission policies between programmes of study and institutions in terms of entry qualifications at this level, for example: HNC as a route into SQCF level 7 (year 1) or SCQF level 8 (year 2). Add still further, the effects of internationalisation and admittance through qualifications from different countries and this makes for difficulties in achieving a broad parity of what academic knowledge and skills students enter with and how we develop graduate attributes post-entry.

Although these entry qualification issues may at times create anomalies it is clear that there are qualitative and cultural differences that set apart the higher nature of the first year experience in Scottish higher education from that of say school or college. This is likely to be an issue of contention in light of budgetary cutbacks, but it is clear that the focus on graduate attributes is something that operates from the word go and is not something that occurs in later stages of degree programmes. This is what marks out the first year in Scottish higher education as qualitatively different from what is ostensibly the same level of study (level 7) in other educational organisations. It is the commitment to develop these attributes through exposure to a particular organisational culture or form of learning community, in which research and teaching are intertwined, that is most significant. Moreover, it is the immersion in this environment from the beginning where knowledge is treated as contested and provisional that is particularly valuable. This often translates into a focus on the learner in terms of pedagogies and assessment practices that stress active enquiry and the development of a questioning, critical and creative outlook on knowledge. The exposure to these practices at these early stages in undergraduate study is highly relevant to the development of graduate attributes.

Conclusion: Back to the future

It is possible to link the notion of the democratic intellect with the developing Graduates for the 21st Century Theme. For one thing the focus is squarely on the sharing and exchange of knowledge within the context of employability and citizenship. This is very far removed from the 'ivory tower' mythology of higher education that is disconnected from 'real world' issues. The inclusion of graduate attributes into programmes of study has focused attention on the requirement for a broad education that engenders a wide range of attributes and skills. This has ensured that higher education institutions in Scotland tend to avoid narrow specialisation in most of their programmes of study. But more than this, the focus on graduate attributes encourages students to engage with personalisation through both practicing and reflecting upon it. This approach encourages students to consider the mutual relationship between self and discipline of study as part of an ongoing communicative activity, rather than simply an instrumental process of knowledge acquisition. There is still a challenge in terms of how educators help students to acquire not only technical knowledge, but a real engagement with how to use it in relation to other forms of knowledge. However, given the need to focus on application and transformation as related to employability and citizenship or civic responsibility, then it is the case that this is worth pursuing as an integral



democratising aspect of higher education and not as a kind of assumed addendum to it. The challenge for the future of the Enhancement Themes approach lies in integrating the previous Themes towards this end.

It has also been pointed out that the nature of higher education is crucially bound up with the relationship that exists between teaching staff and students with respect to a culture of learning. This is unlike other teacher-student relationships that can be found in schools or colleges in that it is founded upon a more open and critical perspective on knowledge. In this regard it is worth pointing out that the framing of tutor-student relationships and associated rights and responsibilities is a key aspect in relation to learning activity (Tennant, McMullen and Kaczynski, 2010). This in effect means the creation of 'deliberate relationships' with students where the nature of rights and responsibilities change over time and through which they can claim greater power (Tom, 1997). This is based on a reflexive awareness of the purpose of the relationship as one of higher education. Key features of this are explaining to students how and why their learning activities have been designed, the establishment and negotiation of rights and responsibilities, and the analysis of power dynamics. This translates into aspects such as assessment, which for many lecturers is emotionally sensitive and intellectually demanding but for students can seem as if it is not only their learning that is being evaluated but also their developing personal identity (Light and Cox, 2001, p 169).

In order to take up a more dynamic approach to the personalisation of learning in the first year, the approach of Carr and Kemmis (1986) can be applied in the sense of adopting 'research into one's own practice' (p 191). Here, the notion of the insider's vantage point is crucial in thinking through **how** aspects such as personal development planning can be applied at a subject or discipline level. Hence, such an approach can offer students an awareness of how **their** aims and purposes can be asserted in an emancipatory way (Carr and Kemmis, 1986, p 136). This approach chimes with that of John Mezirow (1991) who argues that transformational learning can occur through a process involving a 'disorientating dilemma' followed by critical reflection and new interpretations of experience. In applying this to personalisation of the first year in higher education the aim should be to encourage students to examine their personal assumptions and explore new possibilities. In this way it is clear that engagement with the learning process is crucial in terms of the narratives that shape a relational identification with these practices. It is in this sense that this is an aspect of the 'higher' nature of higher education; that it is not just an education into a practice but an education about a practice. It is, in Aristotelian terms, the notion of 'praxis'; how one lives as a citizen and human being, and is the personal, social and political embodiment of practice. This take us back to the democratic intellect as a way forward; an approach that involves the explicit recognition of the importance of bringing in knowledge from 'below' as well as 'above' in terms of the intertwined nature of lived experience and abstract academic concepts.

The focus on Graduates for the 21st Century has permitted a re-evaluation of the nature of higher education. In this respect we have moved away from a focus on course content towards one of learner capabilities. However, there are still challenges ahead, principally in terms of how we reconcile the increasing trend in personalisation of the learning experience with that of an 'industrial model' of structuring that experience. This is something that will increasingly impact on the first year given the diversity of learner backgrounds and qualifications. It is just possible that the whole notion of year of study may give way to a more radical consideration of the accumulation of credits related to acquisition of graduate attributes. This notion of a portfolio or profile of attributes is perhaps some way off but may help concentrate our thinking in terms of entrants into the first stage of higher education and their progression through the process. This would then bring about a more fundamental reappraisal of what we mean by the stage, level and year.

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