Reasons to be different: a 'post-1992' perspective

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Abstract

At a time when British higher education's relevance and value for money are increasingly questioned, I argue that post-1992 universities should resist the temptation to emulate their 'elite' counterparts; and suggest some reasons why, and ways in which, they might do things differently. My analysis derives from experience of teaching social sciences (especially sociology) in a post-1992 institution, but may well have wider validity.

Keywords: Post-1992 Universities; Social and Cultural Diversity; 'Inclusive' and 'Applied' Higher Education.

Post-1992 university students are socially, including culturally, more diverse than their 'elite' counterparts; are more likely to be comprehensive/state school-educated and without privileged backgrounds; are probably doing paid term-time work; and may be living at home (Metcalf, 2003; Moreau and Leathwood, 2006; and National Union of Students [NUS], 2015).[1] However much higher education may fulfil these students' intrinsic desires for learning, it also needs to enhance their employment prospects, since neither their personal backgrounds nor their educational trajectories afford guarantees of security and prosperity. I argue here that learning, teaching and assessment in the social sciences should more fully recognise these distinctive needs, and that post-1992 institutions should develop a different approach from that bequeathed by pre-1992 traditions. I also suggest that these students' diversity should be considered an asset, to be nurtured through higher education and into their post-university lives.

Today's social sciences curricula are heavily influenced by 'current research interests' and 'received disciplinary wisdoms'. In sociology, this implies a somewhat esoteric and fragmented offer; and a distinctly twentieth (even nineteenth) century, Anglo-European-American, bias – often in favour of theorists who are 'pale, male and stale', and sometimes intellectually discredited, albeit still revered as 'founding fathers' (*sic)*. In terms of assessment, the essay, the dissertation and the exam (usually calling for more essays!) still dominate. Arguably this model, which evolved during more exclusive higher education times, favours those coming from elite schools, those who themselves envisage an academic career, and those for whom employability is not a major anxiety. It is probably not one that

[1] Data from the Higher Education Statistics Agency [HESA] also support some of these claims. For example, 2016-17 data for London's eight former polytechnics (East London, Greenwich, Kingston, London Metropolitan, South Bank, Middlesex, West London and Westminster) and for its ten principal elite institutions (Birkbeck, City, Goldsmiths, Imperial, King's, LSE, Queen Mary, Royal Holloway, SOAS and UCL) show the following aggregate differences (for UK domiciled students only): 97.2 versus 81.0 per cent from state schools and colleges, 7.5 versus 4.6 per cent from low participation neighbourhoods, and 44.9 versus 32.7 per cent from Black and Asian ethnicities (analysis based on HESA, 2018 and HESA, no date). For data on students' paid work, see the periodic *Student Income and Expenditure Survey* – most recently for 2014-15 (Department for Education [DfE], 2018) – which, however, does not differentiate between pre- and post-1992 institutions.

best serves the needs of most post-1992 students. So what might a more appropriate educational experience look like, for the kinds of students I have described?

First, the curriculum should reflect *their* concerns and be more focused on the present and the future than on the past. So for example, globalisation, migration, population ageing, race and diversity, gender and sexuality, crime and criminalisation, environmental degradation, inequalities and the changing nature of work are all relevant to sociologists. In connection with the latter, for instance, this would imply giving more attention to automation and 'precriatisation' than to 'Fordist' work experiences of the twentieth century and class analyses based on nineteenth-century industrialisation.

Second, it should enable students to enrich their cultural capital in ways which again connect with their own lives, whilst also supporting the social mobility to which they aspire. Whether or not this necessitates immersion in the elitist cultural worlds of corporate and white middle class Britain, it clearly *should* encompass much greater social and cultural inclusivity. My own recent tentative steps in this direction include videos of Shazia Mirza (a British Asian, female stand-up comedian) and Grayson Perry (a white, British, male transvestite contemporary artist), discussed in connection with learning and teaching around race, gender and sexuality; and novels which meet similar criteria – for example Elif Shafak's *Honour*, a diasporic (Kurdish-British) story which I recommended to a student researching honour killings. It should also involve systematic engagement with current social and political affairs – for which *BBC World Service* radio is one possible authoritative, and surprisingly non-Anglocentric, source.

Third, it should include more 'issue-based' learning – akin to the approach adopted by public and voluntary organisations, think tanks and others when conducting 'applied' social research or developing and evaluating policy – and should cultivate the cross-disciplinary teamwork, data-handling and other skills required for this kind of work. It need not be less rigorous than traditional academic learning and assessment. But it *is* more likely to be undertaken as work-related learning, to generate reports and multi-media outputs, and to provide stepping-stones to employment with organisations such as NGOs – who now employ around one million people in the UK. The IARS International Institute, which works with disadvantaged young people, and where a former student has recently progressed from internship to permanent employment, prompted *"I'd love to work for an organisation like that!"* reactions from current students to whom I mentioned it as a work placement opportunity. Not least in light of the recent Oxfam scandal, it seems likely that public policy and service providers increasingly recognise diversity – and diversity awareness – in their workforce as an asset and, in some cases, an urgent necessity.[2]

In responding to current questions about relevance and value for money, post-1992 institutions might therefore reflect rather more on the 'applied' educational missions of their former polytechnic and college selves, and aspire somewhat less to emulating elite models of higher education. Indeed, there may be reasons why the reverse should apply …

[2] There are obvious parallels here with recent campaigns for 'decolonisation' of the curriculum – Cutterham (2016), Gopal (2017) and Kennedy (2017).

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