Higher Education Mediating Institutions and Habit

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Abstract

The aim of this paper is to focus discussion on some philosophical issues that informs discussion of the stabilising dimension of higher education as a mediating institution. Backgrounded habits provide the deep context for developing moral practice and other regarding sentiment in higher education. Understanding higher educational institutions as mediating institutions, as forms of associational life which inculcate habit and the development of mores is an important corrective to the discourse of marketization and neo-liberal reform which otherwise crowds out consideration of the role higher educational institutions play in cultural stabilization and social cohesion. This argument we intend to make in this paper is that the stabilizing and associational function of higher educational institutions is critically important to developing habits and mores which are the key support for a society that can still retain a sense of concern and regard for others.

1. Introduction

Higher educational institutions introduce their participants to the possibilities and opportunities of creativity, social, cultural scientific change development and knowledge production within a global knowledge economy. This basic objective predominates in policy papers and public policy commentary in regards to higher education. However it is the important role that educational institutions play in cultivating moral order, social stability and cohesion that informs the basic problematic of this paper. The animating interest in this paper is the extent to which we can still discuss and engage universities as creators and realisers of associational and moral community. What is a university if it is not centrally concerned with moral formation and social reproduction of norms, manners and

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habits that advance a societies cultural and moral development? What is a university if it is not also, and most centrally, a form of associational life? The history of disquiet in regards to the role universities play in maintaining the moral fibre of society is not new. In a lecture titled 'Knowledge as a Vocation' delivered in 1918 Max Weber asked if a 'university was possible in a godless and prophetess time'(Carroll, 2008, p.145) Weber's question is still relevant today. For critics of contemporary higher education a deep malaise pervades our efforts to ground a university in a vital and central moral mission. Philosophically articulate critics such as Alasdair MacIntyre,(Alasdair MacIntyre, 1984, 2009; Alasdiar MacIntyre, 2006) Syed Muhammad Naquib Al-Attas (S. M. N. Al-Attas, 1985; S. M. N. Al-Attas, 1977) writing from a religious perspective, and many others writing from a more secular perspective all question the moral character of our educational institutions (Annette, 2005; Egerton, 2002; Ehrlich, 2000).

For critics of our current condition universities arguably lack a sense of a stable or vital ethical centre as they are increasingly beholden to the demands and spectacle of neo-liberal modernity found in the manipulations of rankings and the ethos of competition, individualism and increasing pluralisation (J. Campbell, 2010; J. K. Campbell, 2010; Espeland & Sauder, 2007). The extent to which the current discourses of modernity briefly mentioned above crowd out a deeper and more complex understanding of the critical role that higher educational institutions play in cultural stabilization and social cohesion is more than of passing concern. Arguably the stabilizing function of higher educational institutions is of equal importance to the role they play in advancing creativity and advancing new knowledge and individual growth. This stabilizing function and the concerns attached to it can sometimes seem crowded out of consideration in a discursive environment increasingly dominated by neo-liberal discourse, marketization and choice. The stabilizing function of universities results from and is reinforced by the way in which universities function to their members as forms of associational life.

Educational institutions are finding that their sure foundation and legitimacy in inculcating students to vital moral values and principles of civility and conviviality under threat by a growing discourse of individualism, competitive ethos and consumerism which radically undercut shared meaning and moral order. The roots of our current malaise are deep not superficial. The university must produce graduates whose idea of themselves in relation to their community and the public within which they act is informed by an 'other regarding' sense of moral purpose. Such an 'other regarding' sense is derived from a commitment to civility and care for each other rather than calculation of our own personal betterment as the basis of being properly educated. If we argue a case for the universities importance in the articulation of a common good but still maintain an egotistical utility maximising view of individual morality and preference formation (the identity of the unencumbered self) then the deep and substantive basis of our commitments to the common good will always be undermined and threatened by self-seeking egotism. If our institutions are lacking any sense of thick commitment to substantive values not reducible to profit, competition or consumption and fail to provide students or staff with any position from which to engage the varied viewpoints of modern life the result is anxiety, confusion and a retreat into self-serving behaviour.

This problem of educational institutions increasingly lacking a sense of moral or vital centre (Al-Attas-, 1992; S. M. N. Al-Attas, 1985; Shils, 1975) is not accidental. Critics lament a loss of moral compass in our institutions and even suggest that the very 'soul' of higher education is under threat (Alasdair MacIntyre, 2007, 2009; Alasdiar MacIntyre, 2006). Commitment to a substantive moral mission for universities has been a key characteristic of the discourse of higher education over time yet the language of moral mission sounds increasingly hollow when put against the more obvious business discourse that now drives the agendas of many higher educational institutions (Johnston, 1910). Scholars have sought to understand the problems within our educational institutions in a number of ways. One way of framing the tension in education is through the concept of educational dualism or the split between knowledge and ethics (Hashim, 2004). Another way is in pointing out the tension between constancy of change and our capacities to reproduce social norms. Yet another dualism is the tension between habit and choice. Each of these dualisms points to the fundamental tension that informs the reform efforts in higher education. We face a breakdown in agreed to moral norms. Critics of modernity have articulated this tension in simple terms; the tension between the oversupply of information, knowledge and choice in the world and our need for predictability, stability and groundedness.