



Willmore, C. (2016). Rethinking aims: the responsible university. In *Sustainability in Higher Education: Challenges and Opportunities* (pp. 86-88). Christ Church Canterbury University.
<https://www.canterbury.ac.uk/about-us/docs/2016-sustainability-conference-proceedings.pdf>

Peer reviewed version

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Rethinking aims: The responsible university

Keywords: future university, values, narrative, theory/practice, Bristol Futures, experimentalist governance,

Short summary: Future Universities will need to engage values as well as knowledge, link theory and practice and develop new forms of communication including narrative expression in students to enable them to live sustainable lives and contribute to the task of sustainability. If Universities are to ensure their graduates are informed and active participants in change, this poses challenges. Bristol University has embarked upon an ambitious project to link formal, informal and subliminal curricula to deliver this change. The experience of developing this project raises questions about the differences between permissive, experimentalist approaches to institutional change and mandatory approaches and the role of change resistors.

Text

Much has been written about the purpose of Universities in recent times. In the middle ages, universities were inextricably linked to religious faith and were centres of the development of both knowledge and values. In the enlightenment model, Universities came to articulate their objectives as being about knowledge not values, and over time values came to be juxtaposed to the pursuit of knowledge as the function of University. One example of this is that in the UK, when surveying students, we will gather demographic data, but do not ask students about their values. In contrast, in the USA, SERU conducts a survey across many universities each year and in that survey it is considered perfectly acceptable to ask students about their attitudes and values in the context of evaluating their experience of university study.

Education for sustainability challenges those enlightenment models of the academy in three ways”

- It engages values as well as knowledge – indeed knowledge about the sustainability challenges we face is of little use without the values that will lead a person to do something.
- Education to live responsibly places a premium on linking theory and practice, working out what theoretical understanding means in practice and then learning to do it, through engagement. This is not about work experience, learning to be a better employee, it is about engagement with the public, private and voluntary sectors as part of a process of working out a student’s personal approach to life and building the habits and practices that will enable them to live sustainably.
- It engages both qualitative and quantitative research and requires us to explore different modes of narrative. The recent EU Referendum is but one example of a context in which narrative, and belief have been shown to be more influential than argument using expert methodologies. We need to skill our students to be people who place evidence at the centre of their own decision making, have expertise to use evidence reliably, but who can communicate in narrative modes as well.

University strategies are gradually responding to these challenges. Bristol University, in its latest strategy has taken a clear position in seeing its aim as being to produce graduates who have values and are going to be active in seeking to implement them:

“ Our graduates will be informed and active participants in moving society towards sustainability; they should be capable of reflection and of behaving ethically, and should be aware of disadvantage and social justice, and be willing to participate to help create a wiser and better society. “ (Bristol University Bristol Futures Strategy 2016)

That sort of commitment challenges institutions to rethink what they deliver and how. How do we encourage students to remain creative in the face of the structures of education? How do we help students to learn to tread more lightly on the planet in the lifetime ahead of them? How do we skill them to be change agents, resilient, adaptive and ready to make a difference? How do we face up to the limitations of scientific methodologies in terms of public opinion for example the extent to which attitudes to fracking are based on narratives and personal relationships not on scientific methodologies? Or attitudes to the EU not based on evidence about impacts? It is not satisfactory to say people must be educated better to rely upon expert methodologies, we need to skill our students to communicate in ways that are effective to the whole population.

Bristol is seeking to address this through an ambitious programme, called Bristol Futures, a transformative project which explicitly engages all students in sustainability, innovation and global citizenship, and brings together student experience in their formal curriculum, informal curriculum (such as Student Union activities) and subliminal curriculum (the experience of the University estate). It will involve students in working with the community and gaining experience of diverse contexts, building upon the Bristol Green Capital Project we developed jointly with UWE which has seen students putting in 100,000 hours a year into the community on sustainability projects.

In a previous PedRIO paper, I explored the question of experimentalist leadership, and its strength as a means for encouraging innovation for sustainability in and beyond the curriculum. It uses strategic leadership to encourage innovation focussed upon sustainability, and then seeks to make visible and share that innovation, as part of a positive feedback loop. Bristol University has been using that sort of approach with considerable success in encouraging and promoting education for sustainability within disciplinary curricula and in the development of interdisciplinary and extra curricular opportunities.

However with the adoption of the new strategy and the Bristol Futures project, the University has moved from what might have been as a permissive model (however strong the cultural imperative) to a more universalist one. This sort of change raises interesting questions about the role of blockers in mandatory as opposed to permissive systems. Experimentalist models work with the willing, and encourage participation, positively encouraging differential rates of progress. There are plenty of relatively willing people to work with. Blockers, who do not share the agenda, or see what they consider insurmountable resource barriers, simply do not participate, and are seldom in a position to block others doing so. Individuals who do not share the agenda do not

need to change, although the spread of cultural change may eventually lead them to choose to change.

But in a mandatory model, where the approach and resources are subject to central approval, blockers are more visible and potentially more powerful. They can spot other blockers, and it can prove harder to continue the momentum of change in the face of those blockers. By articulating a more detailed strategy as opposed to adopting an experimentalist approach and encouraging change, a specific target for blocker activity is developed. Blocking can take many forms, and the nature of the institutional culture will affect both the potential for such activity and its impact. In deciding the point at which to move from a strategic permissive to mandatory approach the question of the role of blockers is a crucial factor. For some the issues are of resource, for some disciplinary space, for some fear about areas with which they are not familiar, and for some a commitment to a particular form of university or education. Some Universities are highly centralised with change driven from the top, but in devolved institutions, with disciplinary and academic autonomy, change relies on addressing these causes in a highly individuated way. The Bristol approach was the product of an extensive strategic debate across the entire University to develop a shared vision for the future, as the first step in building a platform for change, respecting the disciplinary and academic autonomy which is a core part of the institution's identity.

The repositioning of the academy to meet the challenges of tomorrow requires us to address the very function of a university, modes of communication, the relationship between knowledge, evidence and values, and the relationship of theory to practice. If we want to reposition the academy, we need to engage in a broad debate about all of these, and ensure that across the whole academy we embark on a journey that engages with each individual and their personal academic journey.

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