

Opinion Pieces

The Business Studies University

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One of my research interests in the changing interface between Further and Higher Education is the ‘businessification’ of English universities that presents a new model of Higher Education, one which may be called ‘The Business Studies University’.

The BSU already exists in many HE institutions, in the way in which modular course choice is presented to students as the prime example of what the philosopher of education, Basil Bernstein, called ‘a collection code’ (Bernstein, 1990). That is, it collects together a number of different areas of study or practice in relation to a central activity – in this case, business. However, business is so large and diffuse an activity that the sub-disciplines collected together do not focus on any one central practice and/or theoretical canon, as, for example, in the way that the discipline of Education (or Education Studies) collects its constituent elements of philosophy, psychology and sociology in relation to learning and the art – or is it a science or craft? – of teaching (Furlong, 2013).

Such collection can be typical for the more than 20% of English undergraduates following (One would no longer say ‘reading’ in relation to any undergraduate programme!) courses with ‘Business’ in their titles. These are ranged in a hierarchy of cost from the most expensive MBAs through postgraduate Management Schools to undergraduate Business Studies and Business Administration in FE. In addition to this suite of studies, there are also more or less optional additional modules in various aspects of what can be called Business Studies: marketing or business organisation, such as ‘entrepreneurialism’. (Even the ubiquitous ‘employability’ might be counted amongst them.) These are available to students in traditional discipline studies, including STEM subjects, especially when these are related to business – if not to Business Study: for example, in Engineering, not only to build a bridge that will stand up, but also to sell it to a client; and, additionally, connected with abstract and theoretical areas, like so-called ‘practical’ or ‘applied’ Philosophy.

Similar to these supplementary courses, the various modules/courses delivered in Business Studies programmes are typically taught by experts, who all have PhDs in their various areas of expertise, such as accountancy, marketing etc., but who also come from traditional disciplines like, especially, Economics, that have often been agglomerated into a Business School. The danger is, of course, that there is a constant tendency towards fission of Business Schools into their constituent parts – with students doing degrees in Economics within Business Schools that are ‘houses of many mansions’. Another, perhaps more fundamental, liability is that this collection of equivalent-level more-or-less-introductory courses does not necessarily add up to a row of beans, as Mark Twain might have said. In this way, under- and even postgraduate BS is characteristically more like a modularised GNVQ than a non-modular A-level.

Whilst there has been a reaction towards more traditional approaches at all levels of learning as a sign of *Distinction* (Bourdieu, 1982) in what have become the competing

discourses that students may acquire through higher study, it is not inevitable, at least in the humanities and social sciences, that collection codes should collapse into unrelated option choices, such as are made in what has become of much English literary and cultural study. Here, rather than start from the earliest writing that is identifiably 'English' to cover the whole disputed canon up to contemporary literature of various genres and nationalities, students of literature often choose quite arbitrarily from the range of modules available – from English feminist literature of the eighteenth century to Marvel comics in 1950s USA. Student 'choice' then depends mainly on what everybody else is doing, following fashions or trends and/or the reputation of the lecturer and subject (how 'hard' s/he and the subject assessment are rumoured to be). The same could be said for much of humanities and social sciences nowadays.

Choice does not have to be so random, however, but may, at least potentially in Business Study, have a vocational reference so that a student might be sent by an employer to university to acquire background theory and practice in a particular combination of the available options that would be valuable for effective performance in a particular post. Similarly, a student who wanted to enter a particular line of employment (or self-employment) might put together her/his own route through the range of courses on offer, perhaps guided by a tutor. In fact, this is what most students try to do, but 'core' or 'foundation' studies bunch them together and they can then only assert their individual interests by the addition of more specialised areas – some 'progression' being evident here at least.

So it is 'student choice', in so far as it is available, that becomes the central guiding activity of students in such collections of study that the contemporary Business University now brings together. This 'key skill' is, as Aristotle said, 'the knowledge necessary to rule': to acquire knowledge not about everything (which even in sub-disciplines is overwhelming and no longer possible even for apparent polymaths) but just about what is needed to order the available information for mastery within a given community of practice constituting an academic discipline and/or professional (or at least semi-professional) occupation. This mastery is usually demonstrated either at Masters level (as in the USA, when, after four undergraduate years, the 'real HE' begins), or in England in an undergraduate project undertaken as a large part of final degree graduation to a profession (as above), usually entailing further (Masters or above) levels of study, classically in Law or Medicine.

This is also the nature of the academic vocation that has been lost to what is no longer (in so far as it ever was) 'a community of scholars'. It may be recovered by giving students a sense of joining a continuing conversation that they can make their own contribution to as a sign of what Lave and Wenger (1994) called *Peripheral Participation*. This can then be *Legitimated* by some sort of (final) examination or demonstration, like an end-of-degree Art show or Drama production.

Business Schools afford the prime example of this organisation around the central student activity of choice, guided (more or less) by self or others. However, with students rather than subject knowledge *at the heart of the system* (DBIS, 2011), the inherent tendencies are for this choice to be commodified by what official indicators of 'outcomes' signal are more or less valuable choices and for further prioritising of research over teaching (as an inferior activity) so that traditional disciplinary researchers combine their research with teaching only by contributing their specialised findings to undergraduates to whom they are largely

irrelevant; or, in an inversion of these priorities, relegating languages, for example, to a 'service function' that again may be taught by specialists in Dante but whose undergraduate input is in conversational or 'business' Italian preparatory to a placement abroad as part of a Business with Italian degree.

In a competitive market, in which nearly all Higher Education institutions are competing to cram in as many students as possible in order to sustain their funding and in which students are trading up the system as universities poach from another, making it easier to get in to HE without conventional qualifications, it is predictable that a new binary divide, already apparent within the sector, will become more marked as it is re-drawn higher up the system. What has been called the Business Studies University (whether in Business Studies or not) will then provide a model for mass HE beneath a traditionally academic elite HE to which research is increasingly confined.

This development is not altogether to be deplored, since it offers some opportunities indicated above for reconstituting academic community within a context of informing student course choice and critical discrimination generally, as well as for developing the various specialist interests and expertise of its academic staff that the BSU brings together. However, the pressures towards a Bums-on-Seats University (see the website cynicalbastards.com) may prove so great as to overwhelm these positive possibilities.

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