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New ways of being public: the experience of foundation degrees

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Abstract

This article explores the recent development of new spheres of public engagement within UK higher education through an analysis of the foundation degree qualification. These, according to the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE), were designed to equip students with the combination of technical skills, academic knowledge, and transferable skills increasingly being demanded by employers, and they have been identified as being at the forefront of educational agendas aimed at increasing employer engagement in the higher education (HE) sector. As such, they might be regarded as an expression of the 'increasing privatisation' of HE. However, this article argues that, on the contrary, they have enabled the development of new areas of public engagement relating to the design and delivery of courses as well as providing new opportunities for the pursuit of public policy goals such as widening participation. Such outcomes, it is argued, are the result of a number of factors that explain the 'publicness' of the qualification and that should be sustained to ensure the implementation of the 2006 Leitch Report in a manner that further develops public engagement.

Keywords: publicness; foundation degrees; employer engagement; privatisation; higher education

Foundation degrees were introduced by the UK government in 2000 with the aim of providing an additional route for people to gain an intermediate higher education qualification. From the start, they were intended to 'ensure that higher education develops the skills, attitudes and abilities that employers need, as well as meeting the wider aspirations of individuals and society' (DfEE 2000, s1.3), and this was to be ensured through employer involvement and a focus on the 'world of work' (DfEE 2000, s2.5). In subsequent policy documents these themes were further developed. Employers would be involved in the design and review of all programmes and could take part in the delivery of the course and the assessment of students (HEFCE 2000, 8; QAA 2004, 5). Work-based learning would also be integral to foundation degrees and would be 'appropriate to the particular needs of the relevant employment sector or type of employer' (QAA 2004, 4).

In the years since they were created, foundation degrees have begun to emerge as a significant element of UK higher education provision. The HEFCE (2007, 13-15) reported that over 60,000 students were enrolled on foundation degrees in the 2006-07 academic year, projected to rise towards 80,000 as new recruits progress through the system. In addition, further expansion towards and beyond a target of 100,000 learners enrolled on foundation degrees by 2010 is facilitated by the provisions of the Further Education and Training Act 2007, which will allow further education colleges to gain foundation degree awarding powers.

However, the importance of foundation degrees also extends beyond such quantitative indicators. They have often been referred to as the 'spearhead', 'template' or 'thin end of the wedge', indicating the direction in which the government would like higher education to develop, a view that is further emphasised by the government's endorsement of the Leitch Report's (2006) proposal for a greater role for employers in shaping provision at all levels. As such, foundation degrees might be regarded as an expression of the 'increasing privatisation' of higher education. If employers are involved in the design, delivery, review and even the assessment of higher education programmes, this must surely

mean that curricula, learning outcome and subject ethos will be fundamentally changed. In the words of Robinson and Tormey (2003, 23), these courses will be 'shaped by capitalists' or, as Gibbs (2002, 201) puts it, the involvement of business will mean that foundation degrees are 'designed to satisfy the needs of those who control capital by increasing their supply of up-skilled worker(s)', a policy that will narrow the educational experience because 'their primary concern is for their own and their shareholders' interest; not the student'.

Such interpretations echo Giroux's (2003) characterisation of developments within the United States university system. Here he identifies the rise of a new brand of corporate university which services the needs of private business rather than society at large. As a result, critical thought and liberal democratic values are sidelined as research and teaching become increasingly instrumental and tied to private corporate agendas. It is this direction of travel, which might be identified as the privatisation of higher education, which is seen as a threat to the system within the UK (Rutherford 2005). In this article, it is not my intention to dismiss these fears as groundless, and the picture of a higher education system serving narrow commercial and corporate interests is certainly not inviting. However, as I will argue in this article, foundation degrees and employer engagement agendas as currently constructed in the UK are not of necessity the outriders for such a project. Instead, I will suggest that they can open up new avenues for publicness.

Publicness and higher education

Both 'public' and 'private' are, as Tight (2006) observes, contested concepts whose meaning is shaped through political discourse and whose use is often highly context specific. As such, the meaning of these terms in current debates relating to higher education is not straightforward and there are three uses of these terms that we can usefully refer to in this article.

First, we can refer to the labelling of different organisations as being part of either the public or private the sector. Typically, public sector institutions are owned, controlled and financed by the state, held accountable to the wider community and serve the public interest through the provision of 'public' or 'merit' goods. By contrast, private bodies such as business enterprises were owned and controlled by individuals or through shareholding structures and would primarily be concerned with enhancing the wealth and income of a private sectional interest. It is this perspective that tends to inform the privatisation debate, with universities, being seen as essentially public institutions, being drawn towards private interests and agendas (Tilak 2004). UK higher education institutions, however, do not fit comfortably into this dichotomy. As Knight (2006) observed, while universities are legally private sector institutions, they are frequently subject to public sector regulatory frameworks and duties. In addition, public funding of teaching and research provides the primary source of income for the sector and is a further means through which institutions which remain formally independent are brought within the scope of public policy. In this way, the combination of public and private attributes of universities exemplifies the limitations of the approach that identifies publicness of an institution as being determined simply by its legal and ownership status.

If this first usage of the terms 'public' and 'private' focuses more on the inherent character and identity of organisations, a second approach focuses more on what they produce. From the latter perspective, we can refer to the distinction between public goods and private goods. Public goods can be identified as those that are relatively openly accessible by the wider public and the access of others does not undermine the value of the product. Classic examples of public goods are lighthouses, which warn any ship that is in sight without prejudice to any other others in the vicinity. By contrast, private goods are generally characterised by the exclusivity of their enjoyment and the ability of the provider and consumers to exclude others from this. As such, private goods are suited to market allocation in a way that public goods are not. As Marginson (2007) observes, higher education provision contains elements associated with both public and private goods. As a private good it is generally provided to a discrete group of learners

who gain the primary benefit of this learning either for its own sake or through improved return in the labour market. On the other hand, the higher learning of even a minority of the population can also be seen to have public benefits through the further dissemination of knowledge and understanding throughout society.

A third sense in which we can think about being public is in terms of the extent to which an institution is involved in open exchanges of ideas and information with wider society. In this sense, the privateness could refer to relatively closed discussions by a group of professionals or by members of a particular organisation. By contrast, greater degrees of publicness would be demonstrated through an organisation or profession entering into conversation with wider society, providing information, sharing views and giving accounting of their actions, policies and priorities. It is in this sense of the term that we might refer to organisations (such as local authorities, public health authorities or universities) undertaking strategies of public engagement, for example.

A range of propositions might be drawn from this brief conceptual discussion, but for the purposes of this article, I would emphasise the following. First, whether they are regarded as publicly or privately owned, higher education institutions have the potential either to act as closed and exclusive institutions pursuing the relatively private interests of staff and students or, alternatively, behave as more open and inclusive institutions engaging with and serving wider society. Equally, employers from the public or private sector may behave in ways that contribute to the provision of both public and private goods and choose to pursue their aims in a manner that is more or less engaged with wider social goals.

On this basis, the experience of foundation degrees might well have resulted in universities and employers producing exclusive courses which are focused on meeting the private agenda of both, with little regard to the public good. However, in the section that follows, I argue that the actual experience of foundation degrees has been somewhat different. When employers have engaged with foundation degrees, this has often contributed to the furtherance of public policy goals and objectives. In addition, the engagement by universities has developed new avenues through which the higher education subject curricula can be opened for wider consideration and debate. As such, the experience of foundation degrees has been to create new forms of publicness in higher education, rather than privatisation.

The experiences of foundation degrees

We might begin by considering the issue of widening participation. Widening participation is a long-standing objective of public policy in the UK and refers to increasing the number of 'people from under-represented groups, particularly low socio-economic groups, to participate successfully in higher education' (DfES 2006, 3). Indeed, the aim of widening participation was one of the key objectives identified by the government in creating foundation degrees. As the original prospectus stated:

Foundation degrees should appeal to people who might otherwise not have considered entering higher education - people who had left school and gone straight into work - as well as people who simply want a shorter qualification which will move them on quickly in their career in preference to the longer honours degree programmes. (DfEE 2000)

To assess the record of foundation degrees in widening participation, it is important to distinguish between two different types of student who are commonly found on these courses. The majority of full-time entrants have tended to be men under the age of 25 with relatively standard entry qualifications, while by contrast the majority of part-time entrants have been women over the age of 25 with non-standard entry qualifications (QAA 2005).

An analysis conducted by HEFCE (2007, 57) concluded that 'young entrants included relatively high proportions of students from socio-economic backgrounds where participation in higher education is low'. For mature students, the same report suggested that although formal measurement was more difficult for this group, it was safe to conclude that 'many would not have entered higher education at all without the development of Foundation Degrees' (HEFCE 2007,

57). Certainly this accords with anecdotal evidence experiences shared between academic staff working on foundation degrees at numerous networking events and workshops attended by the author. The perhaps unsurprising conclusion would be, therefore, that foundation degrees are making an important contribution to the public policy goal of widening participation.

It is my contention that this is not a chance occurrence, and neither is it incidental to employer involvement in these programmes. Instead, it is the very processes of successful employer engagement that have contributed to this successful outcome. And from the evidence assembled in case studies and review reports, it is clear that the contribution may come in many forms. An employer may, for example, use his or her staff appraisal and development systems to identify employees who they wish to upskill and who could potentially benefit from higher education. Such interventions within the employment context can raise aspirations and provide people with the additional confidence they may need to pursue an application. This is not to suggest that all recruitment, admissions and widening participation activity should be transferred to employers. Higher education institutions remain primarily responsible for these issues and continue to take a leading role. Nevertheless, a supportive employer has the potential to provide additional support within an environment that existing provider strategies have not tended to penetrate.

There is also evidence that employers may be more willing to support staff who are enrolled on foundation degrees, through mechanisms including financial support, study leave and mentoring. This is particularly important for facilitating participation by mature part-time students who are already in work and, as Tierney and Slack (2005) found, students identify such support as beneficial to their engagement with higher education and see its absence as a key obstacle to the successful pursuit of their studies. Data compiled by HEFCE (2007, 54) found that 78% of part-time foundation degree students received some form of support from their employer. In 28% of cases this included some element of financial support, with the remainder benefiting from other kinds of assistance. Other research, by Prospects Net (2006/07), reports a similar estimate (24%) for the numbers of part-time foundation degree students receiving fees support from their employer based on Higher Education Statistical Agency returns. However, Prospects Net (2006/07) also reports a significantly higher figure (60%) based on a survey of foundation degree students. As the report observed, this discrepancy may arise because higher education providers may not always be aware of the financial arrangements between employers and students. For example, unbeknown to the higher education provider, an individual learner may pay part-time fees up-front and then reclaim these as expenses from their employer. For this reasons, the higher student-based figure may well be a more accurate estimate of employer support.

In this context it should be noted that support from employers is not unique to foundation degrees and that students on other courses may receive similar benefits. The report by Prospects Net (2006/07) found that while by both measurements foundation degree students appear to be more likely than learners on other undergraduate degree programmes to have their fees paid by their employer, they were less likely to receive support than students enrolled on Higher National Certificates and intermediate masters-level qualifications. Nevertheless, the level of support for students enrolled on foundation degrees was higher than for other undergraduate degrees and taught masters level programmes (such as PG Cert, MSc or MA). As such, it can be argued that foundation degrees are providing new routes for employers to contribute to the public good of facilitating greater participation in higher education.

We will now turn to consider the publicness of foundation degree employer engagement in respect of curriculum development. This might be considered a more sensitive area. After all, universities and other educational providers are well used to their students receiving financial support to pursue their studies and such arrangements do not directly affect the content of the teaching and learning. Employer engagement relating to the design and delivery of the curriculum, however, goes beyond this. What is to be taught is no longer the sole prerogative of the academics, but is expected to be discussed, negotiated and agreed with external bodies. Of course, one can overstate the degree to which this represents a sharp break from previous practice. In many vocational areas of the higher education curriculum, such as law, architecture,

accountancy and medicine, professional bodies have long exercised a role in defining what is taught in these subjects. Nevertheless, the shift to employer engagement extends beyond these traditional areas into any area in which foundation degrees are developed. In addition, rather than engaging with professional bodies with their own cultures of independence and publicness, engagement with employers may initially appear to be a more closed and limited alternative.

While there is a range of valid potential concerns that might be expressed with regard to this, once again the emerging evidence suggests that such curriculum engagements are a contribution to a more extensive public discussion over the content of higher learning. The first reason is that many of the engagements between higher education institutions and employers take place within the context of the work of the sector skills development agency and twenty-five sector skills councils. These are employer-led publicly funded bodies that generate and disseminate information on the skills needs of major employment sectors. In addition, there are the nine Regional Development Agencies that cover England, as well as the devolved administration in Wales, which provide further data on employment and skills. Equally, on the other side of the employer-provider divide, there is the academic infrastructure provided by the Quality Assurance Agency, including codes of practice and qualification level descriptors which form the basis for reviews and audits. As such, there is a range of publicly available reference points that can be accessed, interrogated, challenged and utilised as academics, employers and learners see fit.

While this provides a useful context of reference, it is frequently in the engagement between academics and particular employers that deeper processes of discussion and learning can take place. Although this is an area in which existing independent research is limited, an increasing number of practitioner accounts of their own development work are now being published in peer-reviewed journals (see, for example, Benefer 2007; Lucas, Minton, and Perrin 2007; Talbot 2007; Thurgate and MacGregor 2008). From such accounts a picture emerges of partners communicating in an environment of openness, to share ideas, expertise and knowledge and co-develop educational programmes. Benefer (2007, 215), for example, identifies these engagements as providing academic staff with 'access to high quality, top of the range industrial equipment and real, modern working production methods' which he identifies as 'a very effective form of industrial updating'.

Clearly the criticism could be made that these accounts by participants are inevitably partial and the very process of engagement will foreground some issues rather than others. There are thus levels of power at work here which shape the partnerships that form and the agendas that they pursue. We should, however, avoid the temptation to assume that such engagements are inevitably zero-sum and that greater employer input into the curriculum necessarily reduces that of academic staff. When these engagements do involve negotiations over 'tensions, difference and contested ground', Doyle (2006, 142) suggests, these should be conceptualised as an essential and valuable part of the developmental process. Different social voices can be heard through such a process and different perspectives shared. As such, this contributes to a greater degree of publicness as openness.

Learning the lessons of foundations degrees

If this positive assessment of the publicness of the engagement between higher education institutions and employers within the context of foundation degrees is accepted, it might be asked what are the factors that have contributed to this. In the final section of this article, I would like to identify three factors that may begin to provide some explanation for these outcomes.

The first factor that I would like to identify here is the profile and identity of those employers who are involved in foundation degrees. These are clearly a self-selecting group and, almost by definition, those that have chosen to engage with higher education institutions to provide new development opportunities to their existing staff and to people who are interested in entering the sector are likely to be those who are more committed to extending learning and opportunity. In addition, the leading role of many public sector employers in the development of foundation degrees may be noted. The exact extent of this is hard to determine as no central data are produced by government agencies on the number of public sector employees who have enrolled on or completed foundation degrees. However, in a written parliamentary

answer in June 2007, Bill Rammell (Hansard 2007) estimated that around 35% of foundation degree graduates and courses were based in areas such as health, education and public services which are primarily provided through the public sector. Given that public sector organisations employ approximately 20% of the UK workforce, this does suggest that public sector employers have taken a significant leading role in the development of foundation degrees. Indeed, it also reflects one of the recommendations of the Foundation Degree Task Force to ministers (Foundation Degree Task Force 2004) that the public sector should create examples of good practice for others to learn from.

Public sector employers may be more likely to be committed to the achievement of public policy goals and to be more used to engaging in partnership working with other elements of the public sector. However, even if this is the case, the figures above would suggest that private sector employers are also playing a leading role in the process, and high-profile examples of the involvement of large companies such as Rolls-Royce, Ford Motors, Norwich Union and Tesco are examples of this.

The reasons why any individual enterprise chooses to engage in such programmes will be influenced by a range of commercial factors. However, the socio-economic context in which they operate is one in which the higher skills, knowledge, creativity and adaptability have become increasingly important to sustained commercial success (Peters 2003). As a result of this, the commercial logics of private enterprises and the logics of public policy have moved closer together. For this reason, many of the capitalists referred to by Gibbs (2002) and Robinson and Tormey (2003) have every reason to ensure that significant additional sections of their workforce have the critical and analytical skills associated with study at the level of higher education. In addition, the support provided by government for this process, and channelled through a publicly funded higher education sector, has been an important factor in ensuring that these workforce development initiatives have been developed within the context of wider public policy with respect to learning.

This brings me to the third and final factor that might be identified in the process, which is the role of an academic community in this process. Where any engagement has occurred it is not least because academic staff have demonstrated a commitment to finding new publics and creating ways in which they might successfully engage with them. This reflects not just the commitment of individual staff, but also the commitment of many providers in the publicly funded higher education sector to pursue strategies designed to meet the needs of employers and employees in their regions. As a result, many new learners have been provided with flexible and accessible higher learning opportunities with the active support of their employers. As such, rather than the privatisation of higher education, the experience of foundation degrees is one of developing new ways of being public. A continued commitment by public sector employers, private sector employers and academics to developing such new relationships will be crucial for the continuing success of foundation degrees and has the potential to further develop the scope for publicness in UK higher education.

Conclusion

This article has argued that the development of employer engagement through foundation degree courses has created new scope for publicness in UK higher education rather than the privatisation that many have warned against. The significance of these findings has relevance beyond the scope of the foundation degree qualification alone. As suggested earlier, this qualification can be seen as indicating the government's preferred direction of travel for the provision across the sector, and such a view is supported by the government's acceptance of the Leitch Report (2006) on skills, which recommended a greater role for employers in shaping the scope of provision. On the basis of the analysis presented above, this clearly presents new opportunities for the types of publicness explored here.

However, the analysis presented in this article also suggests that this outcome should not be taken for granted. The development of foundation degrees generated publicness for particular reasons, some of

which we have tried to identify in the preceding analysis. The implication of this is that careful thought will need to be given to the development of partnerships and learning opportunities by academic staff and to the provision of institutions to ensure that they generate opportunities that promote openness and support wider public goods. Government too will also have a key role to play in nurturing and supporting the further development of publicness through funding and other policy mechanisms. If this can be achieved, the outcome will be far from the privatised future that some have rightly warned against.

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