CULTIVATING CHARACTER IN THE UNIVERSITY: IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICY AND PRACTICE
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Consultation held at Ditchley Park, 10-11 February 2022

Overview

This publication serves as a companion piece to the Framework for Character Education in Universities published in 2020 by the *Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtues* and the *Oxford Character Project*. Whereas the Framework lays out the arguments for why universities should focus on character education and provides some key principles, this publication considers how universities might actually work out a commitment to character education in practice.

The arguments and advice laid out in this publication are based on discussions held during a two-day consultation at Ditchley Park in February 2022. The event was attended by Vice Chancellors and other university leaders, teachers, researchers, professional service staff and students who work at or attend universities in the UK. The aim of this publication is to provide more explicit ideas and inspiration for those interested in furthering character education in the university.

Introduction

Long held as an important aspect of higher education, but decreasingly discussed through the twentieth century, the cultivation of character is central to the research, education, and civic purpose of modern universities. Advanced research not only relies on technical competencies, it also requires curiosity, intellectual honesty, intellectual rigour, and open-mindedness. Higher education is not only about the transmission of knowledge and skills but the holistic growth of students, including the development of values and strengths of character that will enable them to flourish within and beyond the university. Insofar as universities are connected to their local communities and wider society, they have a responsibility to contribute to the public good, both through their research and by equipping students with the knowledge and character required to participate fully in society as citizens and leaders.

Some aspects of university life and fields of study naturally take us to questions of character. Research integrity is an essential area for faculty and students across disciplines but lacks a comprehensive framework. Education in subjects such as law, business, medicine, social work,

theology, and education bring specific character qualities relating to professional practice into view. Sexual harassment cases in universities highlight institutional as well as individual aspects of moral character. And while there is a reluctance to engage with normative concerns, the humanities have as a core task the consideration of what constitutes a good or flourishing life.

In 2020 the Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtues and the Oxford Character Project published a framework for character education in universities, drawing on input from academics and administrators at universities in the UK, USA, Asia, and Europe. The Framework lays out what character education is and why it is needed in contemporary higher education. The publication offers some considerations for applying the Framework but leaves largely unaddressed important questions regarding policy and practice.

How might we move from a theoretical understanding of the importance of character in universities to a coherent approach to implementation and a set of university policies and practices? What examples are there of universities or university programmes that have been successful in placing a focus on values and character? What can we learn from these approaches and initiatives? How might the efficacy of character education in universities be assessed?

Higher Education Leadership

Senior leaders have the potential to make an important contribution when it comes to the cultivation of character in universities. However, leaders are also under significant pressure, facing challenges that come with the responsibility for the survival and success of major institutions as well as inevitable constraints of time and resources. Faced with such challenges and in contexts where there is a significant degree of nervousness when it comes to moral discourse, leaders will need the courage of their convictions, as well as patience, perseverance, and practical wisdom. Two particular challenges for university leaders are market pressures and performance metrics.

First, the essential importance of attracting students in a competitive higher education market may weigh against an emphasis on character education in the minds of university leaders. There is a perception that focusing on character may alienate potential students. However, research in the field of emerging adulthood indicates that today's students may be more open to questions of identity, meaning, and purpose than is sometimes assumed.[1]

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[1] Brian A. Williams, "Developing Virtue in Emerging Adults: Perspectives from Neuroscience, Psychology, and Sociology" in Jonathan Brant, Edward Brooks and Michael Lamb, eds, Cultivating Virtue in the University (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022).

This is supported by the positive response of diverse groups of undergraduate and postgraduate students to programmes that focus specifically on character development.[2]

Second, performance metrics—such as the ranking of business schools according to graduate salary—make it difficult for leaders to advance important holistic aspects of education, including the development of character. This might be best addressed at the regulatory level, where a focus on character from regulators and ranking bodies would help to empower leaders within individual institutions. For example, the Australian Government's Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency (TEQSA) has made academic integrity in Australian higher education a national priority. Defined as "acting with the values of honesty, trust, fairness, respect and responsibility in learning, teaching and research", Universities Australia has issued principles for best practice and run a series of workshops to foster a culture of academic integrity across the sector. The Integrity Best Practice Principles assert that it is "vital for students and all staff to act in an honest way and take responsibility for their actions" and that "staff should be role models to students."[3] They "seek to provide a baseline from which the academic integrity of all students can be encouraged, supported and enhanced."[4] Such published principles and the emphasis on institutional ownership within them have the potential to strengthen proactive leadership across the sector.

While it may not be straightforward, university leaders are well placed to consider the bigger picture of values and character in the university and advance a systematic, institution-wide approach. For example, the University of Sydney undertook an 18-month consultation on the university's values, involving the whole university community, through which talk of values began to permeate private conversations and the wider discourse. A clear rationale for the exercise was found in the nature of the university as a normative community that is looked to by society for thought leadership. A single-minded focus on the university's values as restricted to those that govern university debate gave the process legitimacy, the values proper to the university as an institution being those that directly support the disagreement necessary to constructively advance academic inquiry.

This institutional approach to values relates naturally to character—understood as the set of dispositions necessary for values to be consistently practised—and particularly to the intellectual character virtues that are essential to university research and teaching. Values provide the framework and foundation on which character virtues, commonly understood as "values in action", can be built.[5] Focusing on faculty before students can enable depth of

[2] Edward Brooks, Jonathan Brant, & Michael Lamb. How can universities cultivate leaders of character? Insights from a leadership and character development program at the University of Oxford. International Journal of Ethics Education 4, 167–182 (2019)

[3] Universities Australia, UA Academic Integrity Best Practice Principles (2017), p. 4. Online: https://www.universitiesaustralia.edu.au/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/UA-Academic-Integrity-Best-Practice-Principles.pdf

[4] Universities Australia, UA Academic Integrity, p. 5.

[5] Christoper Peterson & Martin E. P. Seligman. Character Strengths and Virtues: A Handbook and Classification. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004).

ownership within the university community and provides credibility to subsequent consideration of the place of character education in curricular and extra-curricular student programmes.

If there is potential in the work of leaders to further a whole-institution approach to character education, a further virtue which has specific importance for leaders is humility. While leaders may champion initiatives, catalyse conversation, and clear barriers, liberating others to incorporate an emphasis on character into their work in the university, to fix too strongly on a "grand plan" approach can place too much emphasis on those at the top and their ability to steer institutional change. In some cases, grassroots efforts may be as or more effective. In others, what may be needed is for institutions beyond the university to play their part more fully.

Teaching and Learning

If language of values, character, and flourishing in graduation speeches and university mission statements indicates that there may not be resistance to a manifest agenda of promoting character in universities, some universities are more intentional than others when it comes to the inclusion of character-related elements in teaching and learning. An audit of university offerings and a survey of administrators would enable assessment of university "buy-in". To what extent is character education already taking place within universities, and to what extent is there resistance to character education and amongst whom?

Certainly, one important concern is that of the university lecturers who are tasked with much of the teaching in UK universities, and who are currently engaged in industrial action over issues of pay, casualisation, equity, and workload. The lack of flourishing amongst university staff on account of these socio-economic and political factors presents a major challenge for the promotion of character and flourishing through their teaching.

When it comes to the teaching of character itself, it is important to recognise the difference between school and university contexts. Character is shaped by personal interactions, patterns and practices in families, communities, and organisational contexts, but rightly understood it is also rational and free, involving choice and autonomy. In university contexts, where we are talking about the education of those beyond the age of majority, it is important that this autonomy is upheld. Character education in the university should therefore be critical, engaging fully with shadow-sides of character virtues and opposing views and opinions.

For character education to be plausible in the formal curriculum, it will need to be incorporated in line with the academic discipline and aims of the module or course. For example, in philosophy, a module on Aristotelian virtue ethics might include teaching on contemporary neo-Aristotelian theories of character and character education, including strategies of character development. In psychology, a module on positive psychology might be configured to increase virtue literacy, help cultivate practical wisdom by stimulating reflection on experience, and promote ethical reflection on the nature of the good life. Professional programmes might actively draw on recent work on character and leadership, introducing the specific importance of identified character virtues for professional practice and leadership in different fields, along with discussion of relevant exemplars. A course in teacher education, for example, might include reflection on exemplars drawn from the experience of the class before going on to consider the importance of such role-modelling for the trainee teachers themselves. Such reflection on personal experience and individual purpose could be incorporated into other professional and degree programmes.

Implications for Students

While universities usually have a set of structured support services focused on career development and guidance, character and personal development is often neglected. Current student services focus on helping students to complete their course of study and find their next job, but often without addressing underlying questions of vocation and purpose. Some leadership development programmes, such as those offered by endowed scholarship providers, address these questions and allow students to develop themselves beyond their discipline-specific expertise. However, such opportunities are extremely limited in nature and remain out of reach for the majority of students. As a result, post-graduation, students are thrown into a world full of complex, interconnected challenges without sufficient understanding of the character strengths needed to flourish and how they might develop them.

For many postgraduate students, particularly those studying one-year Master's degrees, the short time spent at university provides a rare opportunity to reflect on past choices and make career transitions. However, without support and guidance, their next step becomes a short-term decision that is weighted towards immediate financial benefit and prestige but ignores longer-term implications. The impact of post-graduation career decisions has a significant impact on students' personal and professional lives. There is a need and opportunity to provide important support for students with an emphasis on personal purpose as well as character. Perhaps this could take place by scaling structured co-curricular initiatives, making available the character and leadership development benefits offered by scholarship programmes to students across the university.

Whatever structures are developed, for character education to be helpful to students it needs to connect to their experience in a meaningful and practically beneficial way. Creativity is needed in order to make courses and workshops compelling. Instrumental benefits of character development need not be opposed to intrinsic motivations but can help to make character education meaningful to students within their own frame of reference. Character education can be joined to career development as well as to leadership, wellbeing, and student aspirations regarding environmental sustainability and social change.

Implications for Extra-Curricular and Personal Development Activities

Many universities provide or resource a wide array of opportunities for personal and professional development. What is often lacking is a narrative that holds together these offerings and helps students to engage with them as a coherent path of growth in character. Important, too, is the language that is used. Providing opportunities for students to engage with the concept of success and how they define it can be conceived of as an inquiry into what it means to flourish.

Sport is one particular area of extra-curricular activity where the potential to develop character is often left untapped. If "in our play we reveal the kind of person we are" (Ovid), sport also provides opportunities to refine character qualities like courage, resilience, temperance, justice, trust, forgiveness, fraternity, and hope. However, more research is needed as to how contemporary sport develops character and how to avoid a bias to privilege in the kind of character that is valourised on the sports field. In the USA, athletes are funded generously but sports programmes are not well integrated into the university more widely. In the UK, there is little funding but the possibility lies open for an integrated approach. Decisions need to be made here since there seems to be a tension between exemplifying excellence in university sport and encouraging a participatory approach, where enjoyment is facilitated by sufficient structure for competition in a way that is widely available.

Implications for Policy

The UK Government's Augar report (2019) gestures in some of its language towards the purpose of the university beyond its economic value. However, such sentiment is in tension with the bulk of the report and the ongoing lack of a holistic vision for higher education from the Government. Additionally, the remit of the Office for Students, the independent regulator of higher education in England, offers an illustrative case of how character formation often currently remains implicit rather than explicit in policy discourses.

A core aspect of the OfS's work includes ensuring that students succeed and receive a high quality academic experience, though it leaves open whether the formation of character forms a crucial part of what it means to lead a successful life, and what constitutes a high quality academic experience. Historically in England, there is evidence that higher education policy has envisaged character formation as comprising a core purpose of a high quality academic experience within universities (the Robbins Report of 1963 provides an illustrative example). These reflections remind us that higher education has several purposes and that, as such, those interested in the role of character in universities must give due attention to how the formation and expression of character inter-relates and interacts with these other purposes (pursuit of wisdom and truth, academic knowledge, and preparation for the workforce, for example).

A further reflection is that policy is not just concerned with governmental decisions and guidelines. Rather, policy represents an ongoing process of construction, reconstruction, enactment and experiences at various levels of the university. This means that researchers and other interested parties need to engage with how policy is practically embedded within universities, and how character features. The civic role and purpose of universities offers one important prism for identifying how universities are working to build institutional networks and capacities to enrich their communities.

Indeed, perhaps the lack of vision and explicit reference of character in official policy provision presents an opportunity to engage and to build on the civic role of universities in contributing to regional growth that was positively identified in the Government's recent Levelling Up the United Kingdom whitepaper. One proposal is for a nationwide volunteering movement based on the model of AmeriCorps, orienting university students towards undertaking community service as a key part of their educational experience.

Conclusion

This publication has sought to provide some ideas for those interested in enhancing character education initiatives and activities in higher education. The reflections and advice summarised here have come from those working in higher education institutions from across the UK – they are grounded in their experience and reflective practice.

However, it should be stated that many of the activities described above have not been formally evaluated and more evidence about their impact is needed. This could be undertaken through a series of pilot interventions. There is clearly much work to be done. To lay the foundations for a sector wide focus on character education a first step would be to undertake an audit of UK universities to identify aspirations and activities related to the development of character. In addition, there is potential for immediate tangible contributions, relating character to important issues or problem areas that universities are facing. For example, these might include looking at the connections between character, virtue and sexual harassment in university culture, academic integrity, and student mental health.

Finally, as was apparent at the Ditchley consultation, there is a great deal of merit from the sharing of examples of character education in practice.

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