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‘It’s so embedded in the curriculum, it’s interwoven’. Citizenship and teaching health and social sciences in higher education

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Abstract

This paper draws on a qualitative study of educators in the fields of social science and health. Participants were asked their views on the desirability and viability of delivering citizenship education as a discrete component of higher education programmes. The overall response was that citizenship was an important element of undergraduate education but that formal citizenship education should not be delivered as a stand-alone component of undergraduate programmes. This paper demonstrates that although there were many practical issues highlighted in support of this position the reluctance of the interviewees was also related to the contested nature of the concept of citizenship and a sense that formalising the concept would be contentious and problematic.

Introduction

Citizenship education has been a statutory element of school education in England and Wales since 2002. This policy has its roots in the recommendations of what has come to be known as the *Crick Report* after the chair of the advisory group the late Professor Sir Bernard Crick. The report outlined a programme of citizenship education for school pupils but argued that

Preparation for citizenship clearly cannot end at age sixteen just as young people begin to have more access to the opportunities, rights and responsibilities of adult citizenship amid the world of work. The need for an exploration of the ideas and practices of citizenship is evident whether young people are in education or in work-based training (QCA, 1998, 29)

Such sentiments have not translated into a co-ordinated drive towards discrete provision of citizenship education at the HE level, although some individual institutions such as Roehampton University have pioneered citizenship modules as part of their social science provision. The impetus for this research was the possibility of introducing a programme of citizenship education that could accommodate both the social science and health professional components of the university school in which this data was collected. In-depth qualitative interviews were conducted with ten members of a university school that offered degrees in the fields of social science and health to elicit views on the feasibility of a module that would integrate citizenship education into students’ degrees and diplomas.

The purpose of this paper is to outline some key findings from this research. It will be argued that although many of the objections raised to a discrete module related to practical problems such as limited space in the curricula already offered by different programmes, there was palpable concern about the difficulties of defining citizenship and transmitting the concept to students. Given this, it could appear that support for more informal or implicit modes of discussing citizenship in the classroom was a way of avoiding a potentially difficult area. However, it will also be argued that this informal model fits with a flexible model of social citizenship, one that posits students as members of several overlapping communities.

In order to demonstrate these findings, this paper will begin with an overview of the definitions of citizenship offered by our respondents. It will then assess the objections raised to the idea of discrete citizenship education before exploring the confidence of respondents that they were already involved in implicitly encouraging students to engage critically with their own status as citizens and the inclusion or exclusion of others from that status.

Defining Citizenship

As the wealth of literature on the subject suggests, citizenship is an inherently contested concept. Debates persist about possible tensions between citizenship as a passive status and an active obligation (see Oldfield, 1990) and about the possibilities for exclusion and subjugation obscured by abstracted commitments to the universalism of citizenship as detected by theorists such as Iris Marion Young (1990). The discussion of citizenship that emerged from our interviews contained elements of both these debates. Both rights and responsibilities featured in the definitions offered, as well as an emphasis on active as well as passive membership.

I suppose it’s about rights and responsibilities. It’s about a member of society having some rights, but also some responsibilities. It’s about contributions and participation, whether that’s at home or

at work. I think it's about being able to respect other people's views and opinions and different perspectives. And if you're going to be a citizen you should be questioning about the powers that be (interviewee two).

Citizenship is about being a citizen. And being a citizen is the rights and responsibilities of people living within a society and the way that you interface with everyone in that society... It's about that interface between people and how you interface with what that means to people (interviewee four).

Although definitions of citizenship reflected a largely positive view of the concept, negative connotations were noted. In particular the idea that citizenship was something that could be denied to members of society was a key criticism.

I've often seen citizenship as a normative status, a sort of yardstick against which people have to measure up in order to be seen as acceptable to society. If you're disabled or a lone parent or you're on the margins, it often seems that when you come in contact with public institutions that it's something that you have to conform to, to be acceptable... So in a sense I see citizenship, perhaps I see it in quite negative terms, because I see it as almost a quite disciplinary power that's out there, that's assessing whether people are worthy of citizenship or not (interviewee five).

To me, citizenship implies that people have rights for things. People have the fundamental right to health care, rights to welfare, rights to protection. But in reality we know that those rights aren't equal, that some people have their rights taken from them (interviewee three).

Although similarities emerged in the definitions offered, it was also apparent that for some respondents there was a sense that citizenship was a difficult term to pin down.

That's the way I see it. A bit woolly – sorry! (interviewee two).

I'm really worried that I'm going to get this wrong! (interviewee four).

In addition to this difficulty with articulating the concept, respondents generally felt that they were not fully conversant with the implementation of citizenship education and its implications for education policy, although they were aware that it was a salient topic.

I know there's a government move towards getting students prepared for citizenship. I'm not aware of any particular programme other than the social skills agenda (interviewee six)

In schools, not particularly, because my children are past school age now. They've finished their compulsory education. But I'm aware of changes in what used to be called PSRE and that being developed into named citizenship education and covering some of the elements that maybe I answered in my last answer. I'm aware that there are some changes but I'm not aware what they are. I know there have been changes in compulsory education, but if you asked me to detail them, that would be impossible (interviewee eight).

The interviewees also highlighted that many of the students who entered education and training programmes were mature students and therefore would not necessarily have engaged with citizenship as an explicit element of their secondary education.

What emerges from this discussion is that definitions of citizenship touched on key associations covered in academic literature, such as rights and responsibilities and the citizenship status of individuals and their relation to other individuals. There was also recognition of the controversial nature of the term and its power to exclude or marginalise. However, some respondents, especially those who were from the health rather than social science departments of the school, exhibited a lack of confidence in their understanding of the term and a sense that they were not fully cognizant of current developments within governmental policy on the topic. These factors must be borne in mind when considering the objections that were raised to a citizenship module.

Citizenship Education as a Discrete Component of HE

A number of objections were voiced, both with respect to the institution of a citizenship module and the introduction of formal assessment of citizenship skills. Firstly, there was the fact that there was a difference in the way the teaching year was structured within departments, with many nursing courses in particular running at a different pace and timetable to the official academic year. Secondly, many courses were designed in conjunction with a professional body and there was little free space or room for manoeuvre within degree specifications. Thirdly, there was a belief that students would not be receptive to discrete citizenship education:

Wherever developments are taken out of subject specialisms, students sometimes struggle with that. Unless it's made very clear that it fits into our own particular area and it's something that is covered – that there are mental health specifics in there that's directly related to them. Otherwise, it's something that they find hard to engage with (interviewee one).

In schools, I don't know how successful citizenship has been but I suspect that it's a subject that kids don't take that seriously and bunk off if possible. Is that right? Is it seen as an add-on? I think

it's not as important. And I think the danger is that there's the expectation – if you do a citizenship module, it will become a lot like study skills or it's another bloody thing you've got to do (interviewee five).

In addition to these practical problems, respondents had a number of intellectual and pedagogical issues with teaching citizenship in a HE setting. Instead of augmenting students' education, there was a general perception that separating citizenship and highlighting it as a formal assessed module would actually undermine the programme offered to undergraduates

For me it's so embedded in the curriculum, it's interwoven. So no, we don't do anything specific about citizenship but it's implicit in everything we teach about the individual and their rights and responsibilities. So no, we don't do anything specific and I don't know in the context of the course if that would work for us. It would create a false module, or a false division. We'd rather the students got an idea of how it fitted in with everything that they did. It's not an individual thing (interviewee nine).

There was also the issue of the purpose of a citizenship module and what the guiding principles of such a programme of teaching should involve:

Again it's more difficult because the problem with that is you have to define what citizenship education is. What is the purpose of citizenship? Is it to make citizens more obedient in current norms or is it to challenge norms? Or active in what could be called non-traditional ways. Certainly, in more academically defined modules it is problematic that you teach citizenship education in an academic sense so what you're providing is knowledge rather than an understanding of action (interviewee ten).

These anxieties related to the difficulties expressed when it came to defining citizenship. The respondents seemed to characterise a citizenship module as something that would be abstracted to a point where students would be unable to sense any relevance in the exercise. Such a module also raised issues about the role of the educator involved: would they be imposing a model of behaviour on students and would this serve any purpose in awaking students to their status and role in a political community of citizens?

Citizenship as an integrated element of HE

Whilst there was scepticism about the value and purpose of formal citizenship education there was a generally positive attitude to the idea of highlighting the ways in which students within the school were already covering issues related to the concept and to the idea that citizenship was a central component of the skills students needs to develop socially and academically. This activity was presented as taking place at a number of levels and the students were perceived as operating within a number of social and political relationships where they were required to develop a critical awareness of the power relations between citizens. This could mean acting as advocates for those who were excluded from equal citizenship status such as those with mental health problems, learning difficulties or weakened entitlement to services due to asylum seeker status:

We're already doing quite a bit within the curriculum. Students are being assessed on some of the areas that relate to citizenship. In terms of core values, students have got to show that they can identify an area where people can be marginalised and students can be able to show how that might affect the services they can get (interviewee three).

The good practice already going on within the school also involved the students learning to negotiate with other students within the university itself:

Even if it's not going to be what people want to hear, issues within the teaching that are contentious, that relate to citizenship are dealt with in that way and that students learn to discuss these things, they learn to do it in a civil way. They learn to deal with difference within the context of a class in a civil way without it becoming a major issue (interviewee five).

This touches on the varieties of community alluded to in the course of the research. Lister (1998) argues that pluralist conceptions of the term community are necessary to prevent an exclusory and imposed 'universal' model. There is certainly potential for a recognition of membership of multiple communities, with individuals experiencing different ways of exercising citizenship as status or as activity or exploring their own or others exclusion from these rights, using the implicit encouragement to engage critically with the concept of the citizenship in the course of undergraduate education and the placements offered by degree programmes:

"It's [citizenship] got something to do with the community you live in. And that can be to do with the university community here or it can be the community of people you live amongst or social community that you might engage with (interviewee four).

It's being part and parcel of the broader community. So not only working in the community abiding by the rules, but showing compassion for people and caring for people (interviewee seven).

This understanding of citizenship was also linked to the role of university education in preparing students to work in diverse and multicultural environments. This could be seen in positive references to the role of placements. For example, two respondents noted that the role of the local centre for refugees in heightening students' engagement with different ethnic groups and altering their perception of asylum seekers. And the university itself was noted as a multicultural environment, thanks to its diverse student body.

Conclusions

The profile that emerged of citizenship education was that of something that was already embedded within the curricula offered by different departments but also something that was often implicit rather than highlighted. The importance of developing reflection and self-awareness in an academic setting was complemented by the range of placements in the wider community which encouraged students to work with and for a range of social groups.

There were certainly ways in which citizenship was construed as a problematic concept, most notably in the idea that it was unclear whether engaging with citizenship education meant teaching students to accept or question the social norms and assumptions that underpinned the term. In addition, there was a generally negative reaction to formalizing citizenship education and assessing it because it was felt that this would alienate students who were currently engaged with debates around citizenship as it would actually decrease the relevance of the concept to the degree path they had chosen.

The practical problems of delivering a citizenship module were not the only factors that provoked the respondents' resistance to the suggestion. Our research revealed an anxiety about the topic. Citizenship as a concept was a controversial concept and one that was difficult to articulate. Setting aside time for dedicated classes on the subject was problematic for those who felt that they themselves could not crystallise their understanding of the term, but it was also seen as difficult by those who felt that such a programme would dictate an inflexible model of citizenship that set out a fixed model of what constituted legitimate citizenship activities and modes of expression.

Given this, it might be concluded that the unanimous insistence that citizenship was already an integrated component of the undergraduate education on offer within the school was a simple way of avoiding a thorny subject. However, it is apparent that great importance was placed upon encouraging students to develop the reflexivity in their educational and professional practice that would enable them to conceive of themselves and others as citizens. And it was assumed that students would be required to reflect critically on the relationships that emerged from this in a number of settings that stretched from the home to the high politics of government and policy-making. In this light, insistence on the integrated nature of the concept makes its perceived ambiguity and problematic nature a strength as it emerges in a number of forms that encourage students to engage without being strait-jacketed by a prescriptive version of the term.

The next step forward for this project is to search for ways to highlight the concept of citizenship in undergraduate education in a way that allays the concerns noted herein about overburdening students or abstracting the subject to the point where the debate alienates those with whom we seek to engage. In particular, we are seeking to create online and in-person opportunities for students of the school to interact with each other, especially across the division between health and social sciences. In terms of developing this research we intend to examine the models of social citizenship on which these educators draw, whether implicitly or intentionally, when seeking to involve students in the development of citizenship skills and their awareness of themselves as citizens in communities composed of other citizens and those who are marginalised within those communities.

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