

Social Competences in the UK Higher Education. A Chaotic and Contested Space: findings from the UK team of the DASCHE project

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Aims of the presentation

- ❑ To consider the place, role and status of social competence in the UK higher education.
- ❑ To provide examples from the DASCHE project findings in the UK context.

Capturing 'social competence'

Social competences are meta-competences (including skills, knowledge, understanding, criticality, ethics) in order to be able to adjust, inform and challenge society for sustainable future.

Social competences in higher education are informed by 3 major agendas: a) social justice agenda, b) employability agenda, and c) students as partners agenda

UK context

- ❑ Higher education as a devolved matter
- ❑ Alignment with the EQF
- ❑ Low fidelity approach
- ❑ Institutional autonomy and disciplinary differences



DASCHE project in the UK

University A: a post-1992 university located in England

University B: a post-1992 university located in Scotland

University C: a research-intensive Russell Group university located in England

University D: a 'plate-glass' research-intensive university located in England.

Methods used:

- Document analysis
- Interviews with students
- Interviews with academics
- Interviews with academic developers

Findings suggest:

- Greater consideration of what is meant by social competence in higher education.
- A clearer articulation of social competence in national qualifications frameworks.
- Differentiation of the terms social competence and employability so as to avoid treating them as interchangeable.
- Think more creatively about what we are assessing and how it is assessed.

The neoliberal state of the UK higher education

- ❑ Universities as machines where the factory model is applied: 'get students in and out as fast as possible' (Moss 2012, p. 85).
- ❑ Degree programmes = commodities that can be sold in global higher education markets (Thornton 2013; Naidoo & Williams 2015; Williams 2013).
- ❑ Students = consumers who make educational decisions based on various (inter)national league tables (Pritchard 2005)
- ❑ University is being transformed into 'a training ground for the corporate work-force' (Giroux 2012, p. 112).

Competing discourses of higher education (and social competence)

- Individual vs collective
- Public vs private
- Economic vs societal
- Policy enactment: international vs national vs local

(Collini 2012; Barnett 2011; Giroux 2012, 2014; Marginson 2013)

Student perspective on social competence

*I think higher education is about **the future** about exploring stuff - yes what you study but it is about **helping you prepare for life and whatever that brings**. It's a place to learn but also a place **to grow up**. (University C, Student).*

*I feel the purposes are - to further your knowledge in a specific area, **to develop as a person, to understand where you fit in society**, to network with other people with similar interests and strengths. (University B, student)*

Academic perspective on social competence

*It's got to be about **preparing people for future, in terms of workplace, for society, for unknown.** It got to be about knowledge, but preparing people to use that, being **able to use that knowledge for themselves, for the community** (University A, Academic, Nursing)*

*I think very broadly it's about developing **critical thinking**, so that people can have their own opinions and not be vulnerable to fundamentalism basically, and **make their own minds up, and make informed decisions** rather than be swiped by the tabloid press or the media... (University B, Academic,*

Academic developers' perspective on social competence

*For me social competence is about skills that allow people **to negotiate their way through society effectively without causing offence or harm, and at the top end of these skills is to contribute positively to society.** And yes, I think university should be enabling students to do that. I think more universities do have vision statements or aims or graduate outcomes that talk about the **development students as people and how they would contribute to society, and abilities to work with other people, to work collaboratively and to be respectful of diverse communities.** (University A, Academic Developer 2).*

Concluding and continuing thoughts:

- ❑ Taking an holistic approach to social competence development (as part of *becoming*)
- ❑ Extending the transition period throughout the lifespan of a degree programme: students can develop a stronger sense that learning is an ongoing process and that they need to continually re-visit who they are and where they fit in the world.
- ❑ Moving beyond extracurricular activities and embedding the idea of social competence into curriculum, pedagogy and university culture.

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