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THE CULTURALLY CAPITALISED GRADUATE: TOWARDS A WIDER READING EXPERIENCE FOR UNDERGRADUATE STUDENTS

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This essay considers higher education policy in Ireland that, in limited optional ways, is diversifying the undergraduate curriculum to incorporate wider reading across disciplines. Such policies, now gaining traction, aim to foster greater graduate employability, understood as the resilience and resourcefulness to secure positions in the workplace over time, and in fluctuating periods of supply and demand; they also support graduates to live more meaningfully in society. This essay's three sections draw upon several sources including a business consultancy website, journal articles, and academic papers and reports. It extrapolates in particular from the research of Julia Preece and Anne-Marie Houghton (2000) who have observed the benefits of higher education qualifications for those living in socially disadvantaged areas in Great Britain, where graduates did not necessarily find paid work or graduate positions. It also refers to the positive findings of researchers in the University of Notre Dame Australia regarding the measurability of graduate attributes in the arts and humanities. Finally, it makes a case for, specifically, literary readings (both fiction and nonfiction) to be introduced broadly across disciplinary curricula, especially in the technological sector of higher education in Ireland. It cites as a template the now long-standing presence of college-wide reading programmes, such as Common Book and the Novel Experience in American and Canadian universities.

This essay argues that there is much to be gained, individually and collectively, from ensuring that undergraduates of all disciplines, but particularly those in the technology sector, are introduced to a wide range of reading material, some literary. In Ireland, the procedures of the Central Applications Office require applicants to third-level colleges to choose specific programmes in order of preference. Once embarked upon these programmes, learners engage immediately in their chosen discipline, whether engineering, pharmacy, art and design, medicine, law, transport services, or any other. Specialisation, in other

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words, begins upon arrival and continues through to graduation. graduation.¹ However, recent initiatives in some undergraduate curricula are now, in limited optional ways, diversifying to incorporate wider study and increased reading across disciplines. These measures aim to foster greater graduate employability – understood as the resilience and resourcefulness to secure positions in the workplace over time, and in fluctuating periods of supply and demand. They also support graduates to live more meaningfully in society.

This essay draws upon several types of sources including journal articles, academic papers, and reports. It extrapolates in particular from the research of Julia Preece and Anne-Marie Houghton (2000, subsequently published in 2018 as an e-book) who have observed the benefits of higher education qualifications for members of socially disadvantaged areas in Great Britain, where graduates did not necessarily find paid work or graduate positions. It also refers to the positive findings of researchers in the University of Notre Dame Australia regarding the measurability of graduate attributes in the arts and humanities.

In making a case for, specifically, literary readings (both fiction and nonfiction) to be introduced broadly across disciplinary curricula, especially in the technological sector of higher education in Ireland, the essay cites as a template the now longstanding presence of college-wide reading programmes, such as Common Book and the Novel Experience in American and Canadian universities.

LIBERAL EDUCATION: JUST GOOD BUSINESS

Human Capital Media (HCM) is a business consultancy group in the United States. It has been in existence since 1999. According to its website,² it delivers “analysis, tools and solutions to make the most of every organisation’s talent, as well as create a vibrant community where decision-makers and solution providers connect to solve their greatest workplace challenges.” HCM publishes three monthly magazines called *Chief Learning Officer*, *Talent Economy*, and *Workforce*. These share the editorial aim to “delve into the

¹ See Van der Wende (2011) for an informative, comprehensive history of the shifting priorities of higher education policies in Europe and America that have alternately favoured liberal arts educations and professionalised educations.

² Retrieved November 28, 2018, from <https://humancapitalmedia.com/about-human-capital-media/>

workplace topics, trends and challenges that business leaders face daily.”³ HCM has a dedicated advisory group that specialises in “customizable and proprietary deliverables that integrate seamlessly with existing sales and marketing programs.”⁴

These and other stated aims of HCM make clear that, like other consultancies of its kind, it endeavours to serve the interests of businesses in building strong teams of competent staff who will adhere to corporate strategy in relation to sales, product fulfilment, research and development, national and global expansion, and so on. HCM prides itself on “actionable business knowledge.” Curiously, though, its staff profiles reveal an assortment of high-achieving employees with non-business backgrounds. The editors of its several magazines hold degrees in the arts and sciences. Its vice president has a masters’ degree in social sciences, and its research manager holds a BA in English and an MS in writing with a concentration in book publishing. HCM’s data scientist studied liberal arts. The president of the company undertook political science and government in college. His vice president has a BA in communications and the company’s digital coordinator a BS in sports administration. HCM’s chief revenue officer studied psychology and marketing.⁵

This sampling of the academic backgrounds of HCM’s executives reveals an array of impressive qualifications in the arts, sciences, humanities, and technologies alongside business studies. One might reasonably conclude, then, that some companies, and certainly this one, find distinct value in appointing staff who have been oriented in the arts and humanities, and that the marketplace allows for their sufficient exploitation to derive financial profit. Given that HCM is a publishing company as well as a consultancy, it will have a heightened interest in appointing staff members with backgrounds in English, marketing, and book publishing. But corporations throughout the world demonstrably do value well-read graduates. *Time Magazine* reported in 2015, well into the economically-driven downturn in liberal arts and humanities degrees and the upturn in STEM (science, technology, engineering and mathematics) subjects around the world,⁶ that at least ten major corporations in the United States were headed by CEOs holding liberal arts degrees. These included Disney, Starbucks, Avon, HBO, Whole Foods, YouTube, and

³ Retrieved November 28, 2018, from <https://humancapitalmedia.com/what-we-do/>

⁴ Retrieved November 28, 2018, from <https://www.chieflearningofficer.com/research/>

⁵ Retrieved November 28, 2018, from <https://humancapitalmedia.com/team/>

⁶ See Jaschik (2017) for a concise analysis of recent trends.

Hewlett Packet, the massive multinational information technology company that was then headed by Carly Fiorina whose degree in medieval history and philosophy prepared her, “not for the job market,” she says, but “for life.” (Linshi, 2015). She also says that her knowledge of societal transformation from the Middle Ages to the Renaissance helped her approach today’s ongoing technological revolution.

In Ireland, key players in business and technology also advocate for the professional and economic worth of arts and humanities degrees. In January of 2018, Carl O’Brien, in an article in *The Irish Times* titled “Are Arts Degrees Past their Sell-by Date?” presented figures from the Central Statistics Office confirming that graduates in computers and information technology (IT) earn the most over a five-year period. The article went on, however, to relay the perspective of Tony Donohoe, head of education and social policy in IBEC, Ireland’s business and employer representative association, about the value of arts graduates to the business marketplace. Donohoe (who, incidentally, holds a BA in English)⁷ says that short-term salary trends should not be used to question the financial validity of arts and humanities degrees because “arts graduates may take longer to get there, but when they do, they reach senior positions within organisations.” He elaborates that “it may not be intrinsically valuable to understand the details regarding the history of the enlightenment or the philosophy of Aristotle, but the academic study of these subjects forces the student to analyse ideas, differing viewpoints, justifications, opinions, and accounts” (O’Brien, 2018).

The article further reports that finance companies are increasingly hiring arts graduates because “they can be better at problem-solving and communicating than numbers-obsessed graduates” and quotes global management company Accenture’s Terry Neill who says that “more and more we’re focusing on arts and humanities graduates because of their ability to deal with complexity, to look at things in a different way. They also have a higher tolerance for ambiguity, which is important” (O’Brien, 2018). The Irish and British investment company called Key Capital offers further testimony in this *Irish Times* article as to the desirability of subject-area diversity in graduate appointments.

Such industry endorsements of arts and humanities subjects are welcome to those of us who lecture in these areas and who seek supporting views and

⁷ Retrieved November 28, 2018, from <https://www.linkedin.com/in/tony-donohoe-71920012/?originalSubdomain=ie>

statistics as to the validity of investment in our disciplines. Martha Nussbaum's passionate and data-driven case for the preservation of arts and humanities subjects in her 2010 book *Not for Profit: Why Democracy Needs the Humanities* is worth considering. Her position starts from the central premise that free societies depend on critically-thinking citizens to preserve them, and that orthodoxies everywhere must be challenged, particularly the societally popular notion that business, science, and technology subjects serve nations, especially their economies, most well. Nussbaum believes that the production of graduates with exclusively market-ready skills is short-sighted, and that a purely utilitarian, pre-professional model of education that is directed primarily toward economic growth lacks soul and erodes human happiness.

Two of the academics interviewed in *The Irish Times* article make a brief but contiguous argument. Jane Ohlmeyer, Erasmus Smith's professor of modern history at Trinity College Dublin (TCD) and director of its Long Room Hub, is quoted as saying that Arts and STEM subjects should not be an "either, or":

I don't see it as a binary: it's an eco-system and you need physics and philosophy to thrive. The system needs to be balanced. It's naive to think that simply investing in STEM will solve any of our challenges. We need to invest across the board. (O'Brien, 2018)

Dr Fionnuala Dillane, associate dean for arts and humanities at University College Dublin (UCD), makes a similar point:

This is not a two-culture world with science versus literature. I teach a course on literature and science and those debates took over in the 1920s as we became more industrialised. They were put in opposition to each other, but that argument was skewered a long time ago. ... STEM is attractive and it should be. It's exhilarating to see what students are doing at the Young Scientist.⁸ I'd like to see social sciences, arts and humanities in that environment. (O'Brien, 2018)

What Dillane and Ohlmeyer are suggesting is that the time has come, in Ireland in particular, for greater academic alchemy. Employability, they imply, is aided by a healthy mix of subjects, one that combines the recognisably practical areas of study with the so-called soft ones. Companies and

⁸ Dillane here refers to the BT Young Scientist and Technology Exhibition, a competitive science fair for secondary school students, which takes place annually in Dublin.

organisations attest to the value of graduates capable of achieving critical distance and intellectual synthesis. Therefore, all of our students, including those of science, technology, engineering, and business, should have on offer, if we are to meet our obligations to them, some grounding in arts and humanities subjects so that they will be more employable.

And if the time for greater academic alchemy has arrived, the time may also have arrived for a broader definition not only of employment, but also of unemployment. In their book, *Nurturing Social Capital in Excluded Communities* (2000), Preece and Houghton reiterate the established connection between higher education qualifications and employment prospects. Focusing in particular on marginalised communities in Great Britain, they offer findings based on action research on “how to document the wider social and non-economic benefits of learning amongst people who do not contribute directly to the nation’s wealth creation through waged work.” (p. vii). Their empirical study of university outreach centres in northern England cities, including one serving learners with disabilities, has led them to conclude that the social capital accrued by adult access learners, or “new higher learners” (p.13), may or may not advance them to graduate roles or paid employment, but it frequently does instil in them “a strong sense of self stemming from a local identity” (p. vii). Preece and Houghton further believe that provision of higher education on a grass roots level has “an essential role to play in nurturing the skills, knowledge and understanding necessary for regenerating communities” (p. vii). In particular, they advocate for the kind of criticality formulated by the American activist and poet-educator Bell Hooks (1994) who uses “confessional narratives” (p. 97) in her teaching that reflect the autobiographical vulnerabilities of their authors, and disruptive literary works that critique bourgeois bias, so that learners on the margins, adult learners especially, can “challenge how they have previously been portrayed through dominant discourses” (Preece & Houghton, p. 79). When tutored to read against the grain of established hierarchies, these learners begin to question power structures, make change in their communities, and support those around them through voluntary engagement. In these non-waged “unemployed” but regenerative ways, argue Preece and Houghton, graduates most certainly do participate in “wealth creation”, measurably benefitting their localities and the nation.

MODELS FOR THIRD LEVEL

As the examples presented in the previous section suggest, whether in private business or the inner-city neighbourhood, a liberal curriculum resulting in accredited awards can generate social, cultural, and political capital, not only for corporate entities, such as HCM, but also for local communities like those observed by Preece and Houghton. Such a stance takes as a given the formational qualities and, indeed, moral sustenance afforded by all arts and humanities subjects as well as all STEM subjects. It holds that a well-rounded citizenry is both enriched and enriching. “Capital in this sense becomes a reserve of social skills which have exchange value to society as a whole and which therefore may provide indirect economic gains” (Preece & Houghton, 2000, p.9). Recognising, however, that governments, funding mass education through taxation, will always insist on accountability from universities in the “formation of professional, white collar employees” (Brook, Lynch & Debono, 2013, p.7), one group of researchers at the University of Notre Dame Australia sought in 2013 to establish assessment rubrics that would gauge the attainments of student cohorts following its core liberal arts curriculum. Stated attributes of the university’s graduates include:

communication, critical and reflective thinking, technical competence and inter-disciplinarity, life-long learning, ethical responsibility, philosophical and religious approaches to life, teamwork, research and information retrieval skills, internationalisation, and commitment to active citizenship (Brook et al., p.3)

Following intervals of differentiated types of student assessment, based on considerable theoretical formulations, the researchers concluded that the graduates they observed possessed the reasoning skills that their various modules over four years of study were designed to promote. These are of course the sophisticated reasoning skills thought desirable in free, progressive societies that pride themselves on knowledge economies, such as Ireland. As ascertained by Brook et al. (2013), they are also measurable. Therefore, the burgeoning provision that we are seeing here in Ireland of liberal arts options past the Leaving Certificate examination is, in my opinion, profoundly sensible and educationally sound. Recently developed electives programmes at both UCD and TCD encourage students in all disciplines of undergraduate study to derive the benefits of greater exposure to arts, sciences, and humanities

subjects. In 2019-2020, TCD launched the Trinity Education Project to facilitate its bachelors' degree students to achieve the graduate attributes established by the University in 2016. The Project allows students to substitute some of their core disciplinary modules with free-standing, credit-bearing modules so far-ranging as to include ethics, global peace, the sustainable world, planets and the cosmos, exercise for health, and travel writing, among others. According to its website, the rationale for the Trinity Education Project is that the world in which graduates "live and work is ever-changing and that this is a period of transformational change globally" for which they require the "mental flexibility" to meet their "responsibilities and potential as global citizens".⁹ The Electives Programme at UCD likewise takes as a given the broadening qualities afforded by all arts and humanities subjects as well as all STEM subjects.¹⁰ Both TCD and UCD anticipate that future graduates who opt to undertake electives will have developed greater resilience and resourcefulness to secure positions in the workplace over time and to live more meaningfully in society. UCD's Discovery Modules, in particular, offer content of global significance such as childhood, climate, and war.

As the technological sector of higher education in Ireland continues to develop through its own period of transformational change, which has seen the establishment of the Technological University (TU Dublin) in 2019 with perhaps more TUs to come in the future, opportunities may arise to forge multi-disciplinary electives programmes for undergraduate students. Modularisation as a principle is already well established, whereby students can flexibly choose and combine certain subjects within their programmes of study, and some of the institutes of technology do currently have humanities programmes that might undergird wider options for TU students in the future. Cross-disciplinary degrees, such as business and languages, are also long-standing in the IT sector, in particular in the former Dublin Institute of Technology, now the TU Dublin. But whether or not programmes similar to the Trinity Education Project or the UCD Electives Programme ever come into existence in Ireland's technological universities or institutes of technology, smaller, alternative initiatives could serve similar purposes of increasing cultural capital and enhancing employability in graduates. Specifically, programmes such as Common Book and the Novel Experience in the United States and Canada offer possible models. These tend not to be credit-carrying toward an award

⁹ Retrieved November 28, 2018, from <https://www.tcd.ie/TEP/background-objectives.php>

¹⁰ Retrieved November 28, 2018, from <http://www.ucd.ie/students/electives.html>

and are entirely voluntary, but academically encouraged.¹¹ They are well orchestrated by designated staff members and driven by institutional expectation, usually in the first year of study. Students who opt in must read a single prescribed book of critical accolade and take part in activities and discussions around its content. Some institutions sustain the programme into the final year of study, with a new book each year. Works of fiction and nonfiction are included,¹² with book selection undertaken by a centrally dedicated programme coordinator, or else reached through the consensus of participating faculty.

The benefits of Common Book and the Novel Experience,¹³ which sometimes go under other names such as the Common Reading Experience include:

- Shared Intellectual Experiences
- Learning Objectives
 - Critical Thinking
 - Self-Awareness
 - Diversity and Global Issues
- Making Connections and Building Community
 - Creating common first-year experience
 - Developing support networks or friendships
- Communicating Expectations and Learning
 - Introducing the liberal arts
 - Developing writing skills
 - Developing intellectual competence

(Excerpted from Keup & Young, 2015, p. 40)

One investigating team of researchers found that Common Book / Novel Experience programmes are more eagerly participated in by academic staff members when they receive the benefit of metrics-based professional development recognition, such as credit toward promotion or other advancement, when the learning and teaching unit or other central office issues guidelines, activities, or suggestions for incorporating the common book into

¹¹ See Dunlap (2012) for a short history of such programmes.

¹² In keeping with the views of David Carlin and Francesca Rendell-Short in their 2013 article “Nonfiction now: a (non)introduction”, I use the term nonfiction as opposed to its hyphenated form non-fiction.

¹³ Common reading programmes are not without controversy. Some have been criticised for promoting books at reading levels thought too low for college and university students. For a summary analysis, see Wood (2018).

class work; and when the common book has been selected through a staff voting process (Ferguson, Brown & Piper, 2018).

In whatever manner such programmes take shape, those of us who come from the academic study of literature and composition will readily attest that the study of fine writing leads to a greater capacity for cogent expression. From amplitude comes aptitude: the more widely our students read, the more sophisticated they become both as readers and as writers. An optional, well-structured common reading programme in the technological sector of higher education in Ireland would afford incoming students greater facility with the written word, as well as the pleasure of group coherence in a magnanimous exercise of community reading. It would also allow for the attendant, if indirect, benefits of increased cultural capital and greater employability, broadly defined.¹⁴

Such a vision of common reading is in keeping with the *National Strategy for Higher Education to 2030* report (Higher Education Strategy Group, 2011)¹⁵ which repeatedly identifies student creativity as a highly desirable and employable graduate attribute. It cautions against “over-specialisation” and advocates for increased centrality of the arts and humanities. In numerous sections, such as the following, the wording is explicit:

To address the societal needs over the coming years, increased attention must be paid to core skills such as quantitative reasoning, critical thinking, communication skills, team-working skills and the effective use of information technology. The emphasis has switched from over-specialisation towards deeper and broader disciplinary foundations, with learning objectives that explicitly seek to nurture in students the creativity, enthusiasm and skills required for continual engagement with learning. In this context, the arts, humanities and social sciences have a key role to play. (p. 35)

In a proactive context such as the one described here, educators and educational policy makers from all disciplines in Ireland ought to be able to

¹⁴ TU Dublin’s definition of employability emphasises resilience and resourcefulness with particular emphasis on “the development of a set of aptitudes, attitudes and attributes which enable TU Dublin students and graduates to develop academically, vocationally, socially and personally; empowering them to contribute meaningfully to society and the economy in career paths which are personally fulfilling and successful” (Kilmartin, 2018, p. 3).

¹⁵ This is sometimes referred to as the Hunt Report, after its chairperson, Colin Hunt.

proceed on the basis that exposure to general studies, to arts and humanities subjects, is governmentally ordained. Learners who are expected to engage with a diversity of ideas will more readily absorb and consolidate a range of views, parse them competently, and express their own with fluency. These capacities, of course, can come about in many ways in life, but the way that colleges and universities can foster them is through confident insistence on wide reading and the sustained concentration and increased creativity that comes of it.

CONCLUSIONS

One of HCM's magazines, *Chief Learning Officer*, ran a feature story in May, 2018, on the future of corporate universities. These are institutions of higher education founded and funded by large companies with names such as Motorola University, MacDonalds Hamburger University, General Electric Management Development Institute, Texas Health Resources University, and AT&T University. Their missions are to turn out graduates who demonstrate "strategic alignment with business needs" and their curricula focus on "growing talent and meeting the future needs of the company" (Rio, 2018).¹⁶ I mention these thriving and ever-evolving corporate universities here as object lessons of comparison with the far less specialised, more normative colleges, universities, and institutes of technology in most societies. For those students in our world who seek industry or company-specific educations, providers exist and they recruit. They serve extremely niche markets, and they do very well. This being the case, our publicly-funded institutions need not be unduly narrow. They can and should continue in their more diverse missions of educating both for employability and for life. It remains to be seen whether Ireland's technological university sector will pursue a wide electives framework. In the interim, optional but institutionally-encouraged common reading programmes could offer to graduates the culturally capitalising benefits of wide-ranging electives, but on a smaller scale.

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