**Defining Social Change as Social Action: HE’s Role in Addressing Social Change**

**Abstract**

Social issues that need addressing have never been in short supply. Despite regular calls for action, some of these social issues recur with unfortunate regularity. HE institutions have a key role to play in addressing social change issues through the education and empowerment of students. Based on critical discourse, this article puts forward the opinion that effective development of students as social change makers requires education and impact measurement.

**Context**

The world we currently live in has undergone changes for the better in multitudes of ways from social, economic and technical aspects. We cannot deny that we have made great strides in so many areas. Yet, there are some fundamental issues that seem to recur which affects society in many parts of the world. Racism is one of these issues.

Racism is not a new phenomenon and goes back centuries. We have lost count of the number of campaigns to address racism and the number of world leaders who promised to address them. But how much has actually changed? Recent resurgence of the Black Lives Matter movement as a result of George Floyd’s death in the United States of America is an unfortunate and uncomfortable reminder to us all that this issue has not been effectively dealt with.

**HE Institutions’ efforts to raise awareness of social issues**

The global financial crisis of 2007/8 was a wake-up call for many educational institutions, especially for Business Schools, on the need to reform educational approaches. Following critiques of HE institutions’ focus on developing economic beings (e.g. Abbott, 2007), many HE institutions have taken measures to instil social consciousness as part of their graduate development (e.g. Iverson and James, 2010; Rountree and Koernig, 2015) and introduced various initiatives. These include; incorporating United Nations Sustainability Development Goals (SDG), appointing sustainability champions, promoting an inclusive curriculum, and becoming PRME (United Nation’s Principles for Responsible Management Education aimed at transforming business and management education). Given all these initiatives, why do we still encounter evidence of racial insensitivity and abuse around us? For instance, businesses and brands are often foremost in their support of anti-racism and movements such as Black Lives Matter. On the other hand, they contradict themselves by producing blackface sweaters (Gucci) and exploiting movements such as Black Lives Matter for commercial gain (Pepsi’s use of Kendall Jenner in an advert depicting a protest). These are some constant reminders for HE institutions that we need to do more, and the recent resurgence of Black Lives Matter movement is another wake-up call to review what we do and see what more we can do. HE institutions are doing well in raising awareness of social issues, but awareness alone is not sufficient, and it is now time to move beyond awareness and focus on action.

**Moving on from Awareness to Action**

Despite the various efforts by HE institutions to build in social change agendas into their practices, there is very little to no evidence of whether these methods are effective. Unfortunately, to date, measuring the impact on social change initiatives have been lacking and this means there is no way to know whether our graduates are socially active in their employment arena or life in general. We also are in the dark as to if and how their increased social consciousness is impacting their life and employment practices in specific. So how do we ensure that we move away from raising awareness to facilitating action? There are at least two ways in which we can do this – education and measurement.

Educating students on social change needs to be a culture within any HE institution that needs to have senior management buy-in. This education also needs to extend to every discipline taught in HE institutions rather than have less or more importance in specific disciplines. One framework that can help with this is the CCSJ (Cultural Competency for Social Justice) proposed by Goodman (2013). The author suggests that social justice should be part of the culture we develop in students and in order to instil this social justice cultural competence in our students, we need to facilitate their development through 5 stages:

1. Self-awareness – addresses, among other things, our own prejudices, biases and internalised notions of superiority or inferiority.
2. Understanding and valuing others – addresses aspects such as social identities and culture of others, and ability to value those who have different perspectives.
3. Knowledge and societal inequities – is about understanding the history, ideologies and various manifestations of inequalities.
4. Skills to interact effectively with a diversity of people in different contexts – is about the skills needed to deal with conflict due to cultural differences, social identities and inequality.
5. Skills to foster equity and inclusion – is focussed on developing the skills required to transform institutions and create social change.

Part of this education of students also needs to include building confidence on their abilities to create change. It is important that we do not allow our students to fall into the spiral of ‘what can one person do’ or ‘I don’t have the power to make any difference’. Research in development of people from children to adults has shown that empathy, positive emotions, and a growth mindset all have an impact on prosocial behaviour and social responsibility (e.g. Oros and Fontana Nalesso, 2015; Hernández and Carranza Esteban, 2017). Every one of us, regardless of who we are and where we are in our career ladder, can have a positive impact on society. It is important that our students graduate not just with the confidence to exercise their discipline or employment specific skills and knowledge but are also fully competent and confident in being able to create and deliver social change.

Of course, to educate our students effectively on social change and develop this social justice cultural competence, we need to ensure that all our academics receive the relevant training and support to effectively embed this into the curriculum and convert this into suitable content.

Measurement of social change initiatives is essential if we are to not just evidence impact but also to understand how and where we can improve. According to Ratliff (2019) the measurement starts from embedding social change cultural competences into Learning Outcomes across a programme of study. This ensures that at a programme level, in every discipline, emphasis is given to developing student skills to create social change. As well as programme level measurements, institutional and sector wide measurements are also key in driving this change. Measurement of a HE institutions’ standing and reputation in the sector in a given market needs to take into account the level of social change measures that are effectively implemented. Tracking of alumni progress and career profiles needs to include consideration of their social change engagements. National surveys such as Destination of Leavers from Higher Education (DLHE); National Student Survey (NSS) and Postgraduate Taught Experience Survey (PTES) needs to include social change components so that it forms part of the focus of all HE institutions.

**Conclusion**

Higher education has a duty to consider social change as a necessary part of student development (Simpson, 2014). In order to ensure that social justice and support for related movements such as Black Lives Matter does not remain a futile concept, we need to ensure that we focus on education and measurement. Students need to understand how to define social issues in terms of specific change action within any given discipline or sector and have the skills and confidence to be able to create and deliver these change actions. Measurements at programme, institutional and even national levels are key to ensure that social change remains at the forefront of the HE sector’s practices.

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