

5-4 Vocational: “Okay, the V-word”

Introduction

Following an articulation of their rationale for media studies, the participants were invited to expand on this by talking about the terms ‘*vocational*’ and ‘*employability*’ two elements of the media studies and higher education public discourses that feature heavily in public and institutional policy (for example, Department for Business, Innovation and Skills, 2014; Yorke, 2006). In their guidance web pages for university applicants, QS World University Rankings clearly set up a distinction between the ‘*vocational*’ and what they refer to as ‘*traditional*’ or ‘*liberal arts*’ degrees:

“weighs up the pros and cons of doing **vocational degree** as opposed to what we’re going to call, for the sake of convenience, a ‘*traditional*’ or **liberal arts degree**” (QS World University Rankings, 2012).

This sets up a dichotomy, albeit in North American terms, that builds on the discussion of a rationale for media studies and so participant perceptions of the term vocational provides an opportunity to explore this in greater depth, particularly in the next section (Section 5-5) where distinctions between ‘*vocational*’ and ‘*employability*’ are considered. Responses from thirteen participants contribute to the analysis in this section.

Analysis

When prompted to articulate their perceptions of the term ‘*vocational*’ in relation to media studies, a number of participants gave their definition of the term:

Definitions

I would understand it as, [...] a vocation course is one which is designed largely around the goal of producing a set of [...] definable technical skills. (Participant 04)

Well, except lawyers are a vocation and teachers are a vocation so there is a high level of professionalism in this but it's light skills and other things. (Participant 02)

If you mean focused for a specific vocation, like, you know, you're doing a journalism course because you're going to be a journalist, yes, they can be but equally, then can be generalist as well. That's so they're not always vocational for that single vocation. (Participant 01)

And then you're saying vocational it's probably you know a- another interpretation of that would be that they learn by doing and reflecting on it rather than reading and studying theoretical texts. (Participant 07)

I guess when, when I'm sitting in meetings and people are asking me about what, you know, is your course vocational?, You naturally just slip into kind of sort of saying well students get jobs in the media. (Participant 09)

For me (...) whether it's vocational or professional, for me it's the same thing. (Participant 12)

I think with vocational courses it is where you physically go out into the real world and actually look at how you apply that theory. (...) In a way that does actually work 'cause you can still apply the theory (happy) [slight laugh] in theory. (Participant 12)

Vocational to me means something that equips you to go out and (...) have a skill that enables you to do a job. Usually (...) practical I think (Participant 15)

Produce students who can work in the industry, [laughs] very simple, and not just as runners, because I mean, yes, we all know that students have to enter the media industry very much as a runner, and

I think that is a sad reflection of what the industry is, and I think that that is wrong; the industry shouldn't be doing that. (Participant 19)

These responses show the participants have a generally shared view of the meaning of 'vocational' in this context. They see the key feature of a vocational course as the development of specific knowledge and skills directed towards employment in a particular range of currently available jobs and careers (*"definable technical skills"*, *"students get jobs in the media"*, *"produce students who can work in the industry"*, *"have a skill (high tone) that enables you to do a job. Usually (...) practical I think"*). For some participants (Participants 01, 02 and 12), vocational has a slightly broader application with *vocational* seen as synonymous with *professional* (*"whether it's vocational or professional for me it's the same thing"*, Participant 12 and *"so there is a high level of professionalism in this"*, Participant 01) and not being limited to such a narrow range of jobs and careers (*"they're not always vocational for that single vocation"*, Participant 01). These three participants are all based in teaching and learning support units or an academic registry rather than directly in academic departments offering media studies courses and so this may give rise to their slightly broader perspective. For Participant 07, *vocational* has an implication for teaching and learning (*"they learn by doing and reflecting on it rather than reading and studying theoretical texts"*) with this theme echoed by Participant 12 (*"it is where you physically go out into the real world and actually look at how you apply that theory"*). For these participants, *vocational* relates to practical work and the application of theoretical concepts.

Progressing beyond a definition of the term, participants also gave an indication of the value they put on the term 'vocational', either directly or by implication:

Value

I don't like the word, 'vocation.' [laughter] (Participant 02)

Okay. The V-word. (Participant 09)

The notion of vocational education seems to imply, an emphasis on training rather than on learning and education, and I don't think that's what we're about. (Participant 02)

That's a tricky one. I would [.....], well, that all depends really. I mean, when you say, you can almost say yes and no. (Participant 03)

What I'm working around to arguing against, is there is something specifically vocational about Media Studies as opposed to a lot of the other stuff that universities do? (Participant 04)

I mean my honest answer there would be going against everything that universities are driving to in recent years ... is, is, I would almost hope that they weren't vocational. (Participant 10)

Vocational is a dirty word [laughter] (Participant 11)

Because I think vocational has a lot of connotations, deliberately so, that have been heaped upon it, particularly in the last year and a half or two years, under the (...), you know, particular regime we are, where you are seeing a definite two countries approach to education and they don't need education, they need vocational training, whereas these lot need education and training the brain. (Participant 11)

It's not a term (confused) which we would use or associate our degree with. (...) We do incorporate some teaching of vo- what could be considered vocational skills as part of the degree (...) urm but it's not something we would (...) promote in literature (confused). (Participant 15)

But I think, I think, I think vocational in public discourse has a real negative association with it, because a vocational programme, it's seen as kind of, you know, secondary, it doesn't, it's not quite as, I don't know, good, in some ways as an academic degree, but actually I think, I think it's possible for the two things, you know, to have a vocational component to an academic degree and for that to be a really good thing. (Participant 16)

It's... It's not a word I ever use. And so far as I know, theology is the only vocational [laughs] thing you can study at university. I...I... No, I don't... I don't like the word 'vocational'. (Participant 18)

I think vocational is a useful term. It's... I think universities are frightened, because they don't know whether the media courses that they offer should be vocational. You know, the question they ask is "so, what's the difference between us and a training college?" My answer is "none". (Participant 19)

The convergence of responses in relation to a definition of *vocational* is matched by generally negative perceptions of the term and its implications for media studies and the media industries (*"I don't like the word"*, *"I don't think that's what we're about"*, *"I would almost hope that they weren't vocational"*, *"Vocational is a dirty word"*, *"It's not a term (confused) which we would use or associate our degree with"*). Participant 02, the head of a central teaching and learning support unit, associates the term with *'training'* (which he feels universities should not be doing) and distinguishes that from *'education'* (which he feels they should). Participant 10, a media academic, actively views *vocational* as a negative attribute of media studies courses but feels that this view is somewhat subversive and not consistent with mainstream thinking (*"I mean my honest answer there would be going against everything that universities are driving to in recent years"*).

Participant 11, sees the term in overtly political terms and relates the term to his perceptions of the Coalition government elected in 2010 (“*where you are seeing a definite two countries approach to education and they don’t need education, they need vocational training, whereas these lot need education and training the brain*”). This view sees the political, social and cultural implications of vocational higher education as divisive and elitist and needs to be considered alongside the views of Participant 15, a course leader in a Russell Group affiliated university. Her response shows that although she recognises some elements of her course as vocational (“*we do incorporate some teaching of vo- what could be considered vocational skills as part of the degree*”), she doesn’t want her course to be viewed in this way. The response is quite informative. She begins to say “*we do incorporate some teaching of vo-*” but pauses and qualifies the response by saying “*what could be considered vocational*”, adding further distance between herself and the term *vocational*. She then indicates that these attributes would not be mentioned in public descriptions of the course, very clearly distancing the course and university from the term (“*but it's not something we would (...) promote in literature*”). The response from Participant 15 may be indicative of the negative connotations of the word *vocational* that Participant 11 identified.

The negative associations of the term *vocational* can be seen in headlines such as “*Pole dancing instruction among 5,000 vocational qualifications to lose funding*” (The Guardian, 5 March 2014) and “*Courses in self-tanning and balloon artistry 'to be axed'*” (The Daily Telegraph, 5 March 2014). These headlines followed from the release of the report “*Getting the Job Done: The Government’s Reform Plan for Vocational Qualifications*” by the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills

(BIS, 2014) and highlights the ways in which vocational qualifications (albeit at age 16-19 level in this example) are associated with practical skills with little intellectual underpinning. It is a background of this portrayal of vocational qualifications that may lie behind the perceptions of vocational courses in relation to media studies in higher education.

This ambivalence around the term '*vocational*' is also perceptible in employer behaviours. The suggestion that higher education should deliver '*what employers want*' is complicated because they may not know what they want:

“On the one hand employers indicate a preference for those with vocational HE qualifications (eg HND) since, in the employers' words, individuals with such qualifications tend to have better technical and practical skills, are less theoretical in their approach to work tasks, and can 'hit the ground running'; on the other hand they continue to prefer to recruit graduates, particularly in areas of industry, or aspects of the business where a greater business awareness, a broader perspective and personal skills are required in addition to technical skills.” (ibid.)

Summary and Conclusions

The participant responses here show some consistency with the public discourses. '*Vocational*' is a term that is part of a discourse that has migrated over time from specific narrow associations that the participants mention (theology, law, teaching) to become associated with training for what are portrayed as low-skill occupations. The term has been devalued within both public and academic discourses, at least in regard to media studies. The oppositional discursive practices used by academic staff to mitigate the impact of the '*vocational*' are discussed next, in Section 5-5.