



The Role of Place in Human Flourishing and Character Formation in University Education

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The concept of flourishing has long been used in relation to university education. A common scholastic motto, *floreat nostra schola* was adopted by British schools and universities from at least the fifteenth century, and it remains in use today.¹ Here in Oxford, attend a college dinner at Oriel and you will find yourself toasting the college with the words *Floreat Oriel*. Magdalen College has *Floreat Magdalena* as its motto. Balliol College publishes its news magazine under the title *Floreat Domus*, and it clearly thinks the language has ongoing importance, naming its access programme *Floreat* as recently as 2016. There are similar examples in the UK in Cambridge and Durham and further afield in Australia, Canada and New Zealand.²

Of course, the occasional use of a Latin phrase is hardly evidence of the ongoing importance and meaning of flourishing as a working concept in higher education. The language of flourishing has a past in the university, but does it have a future? A survey of the strategic documents of UK universities suggests that it may. We looked at the strategic documents of a sample of 31 (out of 164) UK higher education institutions in order to discover whether universities are using the language of flourishing to describe their institutional mission and, if so, how they are using it. These documents are a useful source for such a survey since each institution has one, they are freely available online, and are intended to clearly convey the vision and mission of the institution in its own terms. They are typically produced after a period of institutional reflection and are used by administrators to provide direction and alignment (Ross, 2019). They include statements from senior leadership and state the core values and aims of the university over a specified time period, often 5 years. Detailed “enabling plans”, which focus on specific areas of activity are often published in addition.

The sample was selected to ensure a geographic spread and representation from the major university groupings. Surveyed institutions included 11 members of the Russell Group (a group of 24 universities with a focus on research and reputation for academic achievement), 7 members of MillionPlus (an association of 21 modern universities that were mostly polytechnics before 1992), 7 members of the University Alliance (a group of 24 “business engaged” universities, generally smaller, specialised institutions) and 6 unaffiliated

¹ The motto *Floreat Etona* appears on the arms of Eton College, officially granted in 1449. Online: https://www.heraldry-wiki.com/heraldrywiki/index.php?title=Eton_College Written evidence of the language of flourishing in relation to the university goes back at least to the same period. In a public document from 1434, St Frideswide (declared patron saint of the University of Oxford by the Archbishop of Canterbury in 1440) was referred to as “the special advocate of the flourishing University of Oxford” (Ingram, 1837, p. 12).

² Queen’s College, Cambridge (to give one of many Cambridge examples) has *Floreat Domus* as its motto. *Floreat Castellum* is the title of the magazine of Durham’s Castle College. In Australia, *Semper Floreat* is the title of the student newspaper of the University of Queensland. *Floreat* is the motto of the University of Manitoba and *Lux et Veritas Floreant* is the motto of the University of Winnipeg (both in Canada). *Floreat et Scientia* is the motto of Massey University (New Zealand).

institutions. The universities surveyed were: Anglia Ruskin, Bath Spa, Bedfordshire, Birmingham, Bournemouth, Bristol, Canterbury Christ Church, Cardiff, Durham, East London, Edinburgh, Exeter, Glasgow, Heriot Watt, Hertfordshire, Kent, King's College London, Leeds, Loughborough, Manchester, Manchester Metropolitan, Northampton, Oxford, Oxford Brookes, Portsmouth, Sheffield, South Wales, Sunderland, University College Birmingham, University of the West of England, University of the West of Scotland.

A basic survey which identified and classified uses the use of the terms “flourish” and “flourishing” found that in total 10 out of 31 universities (32%) included the language of flourishing at least once in their strategic document, with “flourish” or “flourishing” occurring a total of 15 times. Mention of flourishing was found to be more highly represented in unaffiliated and Russell Group universities. It was identified in the strategic documents of 2 out of 7 MillionPlus institutions (29%), 4 out of 11 Russell Group institutions (36%), 1 out of 7 University Alliance institutions (14%), 3 out of 6 unaffiliated institutions (50%).

We identified four distinct uses of “flourish” and “flourishing”, referring to: (i) flourishing students, (ii) flourishing staff, (ii) a flourishing university and (iv) a flourishing society. Results of the survey are presented in table 1, below.

Flourishing students

The most common use of “flourishing” in strategic documents of sampled universities (53% of occurrences) refers to the idea of institutions aiming to help students flourish as individuals in and beyond their time at university. The language of flourishing was often related to the “support” that institutions aimed to provide so that students “from diverse social and national backgrounds... are all equally able to flourish” (Kings College London). Anglia Ruskin and Bath Spa, both MillionPlus institutions, used the language specifically to refer to students’ future careers, aiming to produce students that are “employable: equipped with the skills necessary to flourish in the global workplace” (Anglia Ruskin).

Gockcen et al. (2012) surveyed students at two post-1992 universities inquiring into their view of flourishing in order to discern their understanding of what it means to be a “flourishing student”. The study found that the interpretation of flourishing was aligned with Seligman’s (2011) PERMA model, “which hypothesized that PERMA (Positive Emotion, Engagement, Relationships, Meaning, and Accomplishment) are the elements of well-being” (Seligman, 2018, p. 333). “The ‘flourishing student’ was characterised as academically and socially engaged, committed to learning, and oriented towards personal growth” (Gockcen et al., 2012). However, while this understanding of the flourishing student may be commonplace, it is also resisted by some as individualistic and instrumental (Harlan, 2015).

Flourishing staff

27% of occurrences refer to the idea of flourishing staff. Well-reported challenges facing academics no doubt provide the backdrop for this emphasis. Certainly, recent strike action by academics in the UK over pay and conditions suggests that many university staff are not flourishing in their vocation.

A flourishing university

In 13% of cases, the language of flourishing is applied with a corporate edge: “Our ambition is to provide... the infrastructure, both physical and digital, that our staff and students need to succeed individually and flourish as a community” (Bristol). The contrast between success and flourishing here is instructive. It seems that the language is useful to convey something

	Affiliation	Use of “flourish” or “flourishing”	Flourishing student	Flourishing staff	Flourishing university	Flourishing society
Anglia Ruskin University	MP	Yes	Yes	x	x	x
Bath Spa	MP	Yes	Yes	x	x	x
Canterbury Christ Church	MP	x	x	x	x	x
University of Bedfordshire	MP	x	x	x	x	x
University of East London	MP	x	x	x	x	x
University of Sunderland	MP	x	x	x	x	x
University of the West of Scotland	MP	x	x	x	x	x
Birmingham	RG	x	x	x	x	x
Bristol	RG	Yes	Yes	x	Yes	x
Cardiff University	RG	x	x	x	x	x
Edinburgh	RG	x	x	x	x	x
Exeter	RG	x	x	x	x	x
Glasgow	RG	Yes	x	x	x	Yes
King's College London	RG	Yes	Yes	Yes	x	x
Leeds	RG	x	x	x	x	x
Manchester	RG	x	x	x	x	x
Oxford	RG	Yes	Yes	Yes	x	x
Sheffield	RG	x	x	x	x	x
Bournemouth University	UA	x	x	x	x	x
Hertfordshire	UA	x	x	x	x	x

Manchester Metropolitan University	UA	x	x	x	x	x
Oxford Brookes	UA	x	x	x	x	x
University of Portsmouth	UA	Yes	Yes	x	x	x
University of South Wales	UA	x	x	x	x	x
UWE Bristol	UA	x	x	x	x	x
Durham		x	x	x	x	x
Heriot Watt		Yes	x	x	x	Yes
Kent		x	x	x	x	x
Loughborough		Yes	x	x	Yes	x
Northampton		Yes	Yes	Yes	x	x
UC Birmingham		x	x	x	x	x

Table 1: Use of “flourish” and “flourishing” in strategic documents of UK higher education institutions

that is missing from standard metrics of attainment. In the *Times Higher Education* ranking, universities are evaluated according to five criteria: teaching (learning environment); research (volume, income and reputation); citations (research influence); international outlook (staff, students, and research); industry income (knowledge transfer). However, to many these seem inadequate, overlooking the heart and soul of universities as communities of learning (Brink, 2018). The language of flourishing is perhaps an indication of universities reaching for a broader perspective on their performance than is offered by the standard attainment-based metrics of the most prominent global rankings.

Contribution to flourishing society

A final 13% of occurrences (2 out of 15 references, both from Scottish universities) refers to the contribution of the university to the community and wider society as “a place that engages with the city... and global community and ensures that they flourish” (Glasgow). The idea of universities contributing to wider society is commonplace in strategic documents, often framed using the language of “impact”. Universities report under the categories of economic social and cultural impact, but the focus is inevitably on their economic contribution (e.g. Birmingham, 2017). However, the majority of universities emphasize their wider civic purpose in their strategic document. Heriot Watt University draws heavily on the language of flourishing in this regard, making “building flourishing communities” the first of its four major “strategic themes”.

This survey and its analysis is very basic but it should be of interest nonetheless to those who are eager to see flourishing and character formation taken into account in university education. A fuller study that we intend to conduct will analyse strategic documents from all 164 UK higher education institutions. It will also consider related or neighbouring terms (such as “thrive” and “wellbeing”) and their meaning and significance. However, even before further research is conducted, two points of discussion are worth noting. Firstly, the fact that 32% of sampled of universities are currently using the language of flourishing in describing the objectives of their educational mission should not be quickly overlooked. While uses are varied and understanding of the meaning of the language may not be deep, there is some sign of a thin consensus around the term as a useful category in discussing the aim of higher education. Potential exists to fill this out by drawing on recent work on the dimensions and promotion of flourishing (VanderWeele, 2017; 2019) and on flourishing in education (Kristjánsson, 2020), exploring the relationship between flourishing and character formation in order to help universities further their own stated aims.

Secondly, one feature of the way that the language of flourishing is used in the sampled documents serves to highlight an important, if overlooked aspect of discussions of flourishing in education: the importance of place. The connection between place or environment and flourishing is explicit in 4 out of the 10 institutions where the language of flourishing is used. Glasgow is perhaps the clearest:

“The strategy is about giving you the support, development, infrastructure and environment you need to further the University’s ambition to grow our reputation as: A place where the best students, regardless of background, are given an education that prepares them to go into the world and make change happen. A place where research that positively impacts on the health, wealth and cultural wellbeing of the world is conducted. A place that engages with the city of Glasgow and the global community and ensures that they flourish.”

The relationship between flourishing and place that is emphasized here is not new, of course. Universities have an unavoidable *external* relationship with places in which they are located. They exist in conflict with their places (consider the early history of Oxford or any number of “town versus gown” disputes in university towns and cities), as well as in conjunction with them (consider the rise of the civic universities). There is also an *internal* aspect to universities’ relation to place, evident in the importance of the physical architecture (Whyte, 2015), and more recently the digital architecture (Swist & Kuswara, 2016) of places of learning.

We have surveyed the way UK universities are using the language of flourishing in their strategic visions. And we have drawn attention to the explicit connection that some universities have made between flourishing and place. Our aim as we go on is to develop this connection by attending to the question: How can spaces of learning in higher education become places of formation and flourishing?

Place in higher education

In the following we want to suggest some fruitful ways in which attention to place can play a part in the formation of character amongst students and in their wider flourishing.

Whilst the university may often operate in the space of ideas, facilitating students’ engagement with the material places in which they live, learn and work may be useful in enabling them to ground their thinking in lived experience, helping them to develop an important sense of belonging and form mutually beneficial practices of commitment to others. In turn, students may be moved to invest in the ongoing health of a place such that others around and after them might flourish.

The idea of place and the nature of our engagement with it involves the overlapping dimensions of geography, architecture, history and social relations. Making connections between all these elements and attending to the ways in which they influence and shape each other may enable students to develop more nuanced ways of thinking, being and acting in the world. In particular we suggest that attention to place can help students to (i) recognise and make connections which facilitate moral imagination, and (ii) understand their own limits in ways which contribute to humility and gratitude. What is more (iii) that the friction of engaging with the material realities of place might lay the foundations for practical wisdom.

From “space” to “place”

From the second half of the twentieth century, social, cultural and technological changes have prompted a widespread reconsideration of the role of place in human life and flourishing. Geographers, philosophers and theologians all expressed concern at a “loss of a sense of place” (O’Donovan, 1989). In a seminal contribution to the literature, Tuan (1977) developed the distinction between “place” and “space”, arguing that there has been a transition from place to space in modernity that has left important aspects of human existence behind and needs to be repaired.

The attraction of space to modern thinkers is perhaps obvious, space is undefined and unbounded, holding infinite possibilities, it offers “a blank sheet on which meaning can be imposed” (Tuan, 1977, p. 54). Space implies transcendence and avoidance of the complex materiality of everyday places.

Place, in contrast, is that which is already known, it holds a history of human interaction and inhabitation and established meaning. Place is particular, familiar and imbued with value. It is so much a part of our everyday experience as to be often overlooked (Inge, 2003, p. ix).

Whilst the freedom of space may appear to resonate with the intellectual purposes of higher education - the ability to create, imagine and think without limitation - Jameson (1991, p.16) critiques this notion of space as “depthless” unable to unify past, present and future in ways which allow for a sustained sense of meaning. When it comes to student experiences of higher education it seems that living in space (as opposed to place) can leave students feeling lost (Swist and Kuswara, 2016, p.103).

Connections, limitations, friction

In their paper on “Academic Citizenship and the Placeful University”, Nørgård and Bengtsen (2016) build on the work of Macfarlane (2007) and Nixon (2008) to propose a model of academic citizenship based on “mutual engagement” with place, in which the members of a university learn to live in integrated and dialogical ways which draw together the multiple layers and dimensions of life within the university campus and beyond it (Nørgård and Bengtsen, 2016, p.5). Here we want to develop their focus on “integration” in place, highlighting three important themes: connections, limitations and friction. We want to suggest that these three aspects of human interaction with place may be important for students’ flourishing and the formation of character in university education.

Connections: Places connect and integrate different elements of our experience over time in physical form. Nørgård and Bengtsen (2016, p.14) assert that the virtuously “place-ful” university is formed through the integration of the “private, professional and social spheres of persons and society.” Making meaningful connections between different elements of students’ experiences contributes to place-making and can foster a sense of belonging (Swist and Kuswara 2016; Ahn and Davis 2019).

Enabling students to actively engage or “dwell” in place involves recognising or “inhabiting” the connections which form it: the overlapping network of relationships we have with each other, with the natural world, with the past, present and future. Recognising this range of connections, which create and sustain a place, may enable students to consider the ways in which their own actions contribute to or detract from the ‘health’ of a place (Baker and Bilbro, 2017, p.1).

Limitations: Connecting with the places in which we live confronts us with our own limitations that are the corollary of our location in place and time. We are limited in our perspective, what we can see and know. And we are limited in what we can do on account of our dependence on the natural world and our built environment.

In his commencement speech at Clare College in 1978 Wendell Berry noted that the study of ecology reminds us of the “inescapability of connections and of dependences” (Baker and Bilbro, 2017, p.xii). This idea of dependence on place relates to Walter Brueggemann’s (1977) emphasis on place as gift to be received which draws on a long Judaeo-Christian tradition of seeing human relationships to land as formative.

Within this tradition places have a givenness to them. They are not entirely of our making or choosing. They exist before us and after us. We participate in a place for a certain time but the place itself is beyond us. Helping students to acknowledge this givenness, and the

limitations which accompany it, within their own interactions with place might enable them to develop virtues such as gratitude and humility. In this way place may contribute to the development of character and – through the positive effect of gratitude on happiness and wellbeing (Emmons & Mishra, 2011) – further students’ flourishing.

Friction: The connections and limitations which place implies are accompanied by a greater sense of friction in terms of the ways in which our actions or ideas might be curtailed or modified by the realities of the places in which we live. Casey (1997, p.338) calls this experience “rebarbative particularly.”

The Polish philosopher Leszek Kolakowski describes his ideal home as “deep in the virgin mountain forest on a lake shore at the corner of Madison Avenue in Manhattan and Champs-Elysees, in a small tidy town.” But we know that such a place is impossible. The various material, temporal and relational demands of place require us to reconfigure or reimagine our ideals in ways which might be foundational for developing practical wisdom, an essential virtue for students to cultivate as they own their status as mature adults and the self-directed moral agency that goes with it.

Place and the formation of character in HE: intellectual, moral and civic virtues

Having suggested that engaging with and inhabiting place offers formative experiences of connection, limitation and friction, here we also want to suggest ways in which these experiences of place relate to the development of intellectual, moral and civic virtues.

Intellectual virtues: Cultivating the ability to “dwell” in a place, in the way that Nørgård and Bengtsen suggest (2016, p.10), may enable students to see and understand objects of knowledge more fully. Rather than seeing an area of academic study as an isolated object to be obtained or conquered, a place-based approach to knowledge invites us to a deeper engagement with the objects we seek to know and understand and the web of connections within which they already exist (Baker and Bilbro, 2017, p.35). This connected view of knowledge stands against over-specialised and sometimes fragmentary university teaching (Jameson, 1991, p. 25).

As well as an appreciation of connections, Tuan (1977, p.6) writes that inhabiting a place allows for a greater depth of knowledge. We “know” our home in a way we can never “know” our country because we have a familiarity and proximity to our home which cannot be replicated on a larger scale. Baker and Bilbro (2017, p. 166f) also note that engaging with the places in which we are situated enables us to develop a love of the objects of our study which is not possible from a distance. Knowing and loving, they suggest, are intrinsically linked, and proximity and familiarity enable us to cultivate both. That is not to say that we can only know things which are close to us, merely that we must learn to know objects in relation to place at close quarters before we can develop the ability to know things from a distance (Baker and Bilbro, 2017, p. 167; Un-chol, 1998, p.85).

This relationship between knowledge and place suggests that learning the habits of living well in a place, “inhabitation” (Baker and Bilbro, 2017), can contribute to the cultivation of intellectual virtues such as love, care, attention (Weil, 1942) and apprehension (Holt, 2002).

Moral virtues: Kiss and Euben (2010, p.19) suggest that a primary aim of university education is to cultivate moral imagination, grounded in particularity, and to integrate approaches to ethics combining “theory and practice, imagination and justification.”

Engagement with place can provide students with the means to develop this kind of integrated moral imagination.

In part this is because whilst “geographic rootlessness...enables us to escape the consequences of our thought on particular places” (Baker and Bilbro, 2017, p.151), those who have learned to inhabit a place are able to connect moral reasoning with lived experience and material realities. Similarly, Wendell Berry (1987, p.96) writes: “one of the most profound of human needs is for the truth of imagination to prove itself in every life and place in the world, and for the truth of the world’s lives and places to be proved in imagination.” Inhabiting place may offer students the materials with which they can explore moral possibilities and test their validity.

Civic virtues: Nixon (2008, p.37) notes that “the university is above all a civic space”. Nørgård and Bengtsen (2016) also point to the ways in which a “place-ful” university can foster civic virtues. Rather than educating students about civic virtues, these thinkers suggest that engagement with the university as a place produces civic virtues as a by-product. This relates back to the integrative and dialogic way of life which Nørgård and Bengtsen (2016) see as constituting “place-fulness”. Inhabiting place in this way may contribute to key civic virtues of responsibility and civility (Kiss and Euben, 2010, p4). Seeing places as integrated, and oneself as existing within a web of material, temporal and relational connections, may prompt this sense of civic responsibility. Similarly, experiencing place as a form of dialogue between the many elements which constitute it may contribute to a virtue of civility.

Nixon also suggests that engaging with the university as a place of thoughtfulness, may enable students to cultivate the “representative thinking” which is required for civic resistance (Nixon, 2008, p.37).

Conclusion

In this paper we have sought to outline the role place might play in flourishing and character formation within the university. We have seen that the language of flourishing and place is already used in higher education, and that some universities have a sense of their own role in creating and sustaining flourishing places both on campus and beyond. We have suggested that attending to place is a way of inhabiting the world as integrated and connected, a way of being which furthers character formation and flourishing in the university. And we have suggested that through experiences of connection, limitation and friction, place may form students, and others, in ways which enable the development of intellectual, moral and civic virtues.

In drawing these initial connections we hope to lay the groundwork for a future consideration of the ways in which universities, students and staff can learn to inhabit the places in which they are situated in ways which promote both their own formation and flourishing, and the flourishing of those beyond the university.

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