Character Education in Universities

A Framework for Flourishing

INTRODUCTION

When it comes to the value of higher education, increased earning potential and economic contribution are only partial measures. The value of a university education is evidenced in the lives of university graduates—their personal flourishing and their contribution to the good of society as a whole. It is seen not only in what students do, but also in who they become.

In recent years, many universities have expressed their commitment to a holistic, socially-engaged vision of higher education. Terms such as 'fulfilling potential', 'flourishing', 'thriving' and 'well-being', applied both to students and to university communities, feature prominently in policy documents and mission statements. Universities are increasingly talking about developing 'graduate attributes' and '21st-century skills' - qualities necessary to navigate the fourth industrial revolution and contribute to a rapidly changing society.

> "The aim of the Framework is to bring clarity to the idea of flourishing in higher education and the importance of holistic character development."

In order to fulfil this ambition for higher education, the transmission of specialist knowledge and skills is important. However, a sole focus on knowledge and skills, often highlighted for their career and economic value, is not sufficient to achieve the aims that universities are setting themselves or the value that graduate employers and students are seeking. A vital third dimension is encapsulated by the interrelated concepts of 'character' and 'flourishing'. Yet, despite efforts by some to give this holistic emphasis pride of place, its vocabulary does not come easily to everyone within higher education. There is a need to bring further clarity to a language that is still underdeveloped and imprecise.

The specific aim of this Framework is to help universities articulate and structure their mission to further the flourishing of their students and the holistic character development that is central to it. Given the acknowledgement that 'universities shape lives' and the fact that many universities already name specific character qualities they are eager to develop in their students under the rubric of 'graduate outcomes', this Framework does not seek to introduce an alien concept or radically new agenda. The purpose is to provide a conceptual taxonomy that situates and contextualises the cultivation of character and the objective of student flourishing as central to higher education today.

Listen to graduation speeches or scroll through university websites and mission statements, and it is clear that today's universities, in all of their diversity, are eager to encourage students in directions that help them lead flourishing lives as citizens, professionals and human beings—lives that significantly contribute to the public good and provide an authentic sense of purpose and meaning. Universities recognise that the education they provide impacts on the character of their students in ways that transcend standard metrics. They are

concerned with building autonomous, resilient, clear-thinking, and ethically minded people by introducing them to new possibilities in thinking about ways to live. What universities lack, and what this Framework seeks to provide, is a philosophically rigorous and practically actionable conceptual framework.

CHARACTER AND FLOURISHING

The idea of student formation in universities is commonly expressed in terms of the development of '21st-century skills' or 'graduate attributes' that are important if students are to successfully navigate the modern world, particularly the world of work. The connection between graduate attributes and career success is paramount, but insufficient on its own.

A term that is gaining more prominence in recent policy documents is the ancient one of *eudaimonic* well-being – defined as human flourishing. However, while the concept of student flourishing holds promise for efforts to move beyond narrowly instrumentalist ideas of excellence or success, it can easily be employed in a way that is bland and banal. In the philosophical tradition that follows from Aristotle, flourishing is a central term. It refers to human life at its best, in all of its dimensions: social, moral, emotional and intellectual. It doesn't simply relate to the subjective aspect of human fulfilment, but to the meaningful realisation of life's overarching goals (Kristjánsson, 2020).

Flourishing involves various contingent socio-economic and political factors, but it also relies centrally on the actualisation of human excellence through character strengths or virtues: stable dispositions that combine perception, cognition, emotion, motivation and action to respond in admirable ways to different situations in different spheres of human life. While some facets of an individual's personality are not easily amenable to change once the individual has reached adulthood, some of the fundamental traits of character – moral, civic, intellectual and

performative (Jubilee Centre, 2017) – remain educable throughout an individual's university years and beyond. By putting the focus more firmly on the education of those virtues and how they contribute to student flourishing, universities can give academic credibility and practical traction to their increasingly explicit goal of fulfilling potential. Furthermore, such a focus is not limited to the development of individual virtues, but also sheds light on how student flourishing can contribute to the building of a healthy, just, and thriving society.

What is Character?

To talk of someone's character is to talk of who they are. Character traits are dispositions that are consistent across situations and spheres of life, but are not fixed. Character can be cultivated, and it can be corrupted. Character is multi-dimensional, combining thought, emotion, motivation and action. Arthur (2019: 10–11) identifies some key points:

- Character changes over time—it is malleable, not fixed

- Character is visible in conduct—it involves observable actions

- Character is social—it is shaped within cultural contexts

- Character involves choice and autonomy—it is rational and free, not blindly conformist

- Character involves principles and convictions—it is related to questions of personal meaning and purpose

- Character involves effort—it requires ongoing reflection and expression

- Character requires will-power—it takes motivation as well as judgement.

HIGHER EDUCATION TODAY

The concepts of character and flourishing are not new to university education, of course. An emphasis on the intellectual and moral formation of students, on virtues such as critical thinking, truthfulness, charity, industry, service, wisdom, justice and others, is engraved in university mottos. Indeed, the orientation of higher education towards human flourishing has been central to universities since the foundation of the earliest medieval institutions. In the 20th century, these themes were displaced by important economic considerations and a focus on the expansion of university provision, but they have not disappeared—they continue to feature in public discourse on the value of higher education and are given particular emphasis at occasions of existential reflection, such as graduation ceremonies.

Today, universities are facing important challenges to justify the value of the education they provide, both to students and to the societies that subsidise them. One assumption, on all sides, is that the purpose of universities must be integrated with the good of their local, national and global communities. Key questions are: How do we create a culture of higher education where value is greater than price, moving beyond the idea that students pay for degrees simply to secure better paid jobs? How can we create university cultures that engender the desire for students to develop their character in order to flourish themselves and further the good of society?

While a renewed emphasis on the civic role of higher education is welcome, at present, a notable character gap can be identified in the way that this civic mission is being (re)formulated and (re)framed in terms of competition, performance and local/global economies rather than on principles of ethical, democratic citizenship. Where active forms of democratic citizenship are referenced in relation to the civic mission of universities, such references typically take the form of 'making a positive contribution to local communities', 'student volunteering' and references to 'students as citizens'. Notably, the idea that universities provide a reflective and democratic space, through which civic virtues can be expressed and shaped, is largely underplayed. Furthermore, while the study of general liberal arts programmes has long been associated with cultivating autonomous, liberally educated citizens, there is an increasing recognition that, without due attention to moral relationships, intellectual prowess is not a guarantee of commitment to the common good.

In a context where the contribution of universities to the public good is being questioned, there is a need for a concentrated effort to carefully examine, mobilise and celebrate the role of universities in character education. If universities in the UK really are 'at the crossroads' in terms of gaining and maintaining public trust (Hudson and Mansfield, 2020), a more explicit turn to character – including a clearer vision of what it means for universities to promote personal and societal flourishing – can provide the renewed direction towards the public good.

> "The cultivation of character is integral to the core research, education, and civic mission that universities share."

CHARACTER EDUCATION IN UNIVERSITIES

Every university has a unique history, ethos and institutional profile and makes a particular contribution to society. This will, naturally, be reflected in the virtues it foregrounds. However, while the specific emphases of each institution are important, the cultivation of character is integral to the core research, education and civic mission that universities share.

For research to be done well, intellectual virtues such as critical thinking, open-mindedness and academic honesty are essential. These virtues of inquiry are central to the pursuit of knowledge and understanding that is the hallmark of higher education. Through their time at university, students are inducted into an intellectual culture that shapes them to critically and fairly evaluate evidence and arguments of different kinds. They are expected to engage respectfully and conscientiously with those with whom they disagree and to grow in the creativity, discernment and good judgement required to formulate hypotheses, evaluate evidence, construct arguments and draw fitting conclusions from complex analyses and debate.

Today's universities join intellectual inquiry to an important civic mission to educate a new generation of responsible citizens and leaders and contribute to the societies around them (Brooks *et al.*, 2019). In addition to intellectual virtues, the cultivation of civic virtues, such as service and civility, should be part and parcel of this outward-looking dimension of higher education. What is more, where universities focus on educating professionals for a specific sector or seek a specific social impact, certain domain-specific virtues will come clearly into view. Compassion is important for future healthcare professionals, for example, and creativity and perseverance are necessary for aspiring entrepreneurs. Where universities focus on sustainable development as part of their institutional mission, this will require staff and students to exhibit responsibility and social justice.

Of course, the intellectual and civic aspects of character cannot be separated from consideration of what makes for a good life and a flourishing society. They are bound up with moral virtues such as justice, courage, charity, honesty, humility and compassion. While the idea of modern universities intentionally cultivating moral virtues in their diverse student populations is not without its difficulties, in reality, all institutions have a formative effect on those who inhabit them.

In addition to the categories of intellectual, civic and moral virtues, there are behavioural skills and psychological capacities such as resilience, perseverance, collaboration and confidence that are essential for virtues to be put into practice. These performance strengths act like muscles, enabling students to develop personally across a wide range of domains. They also bolster mental well-being. In some policy documents, 'character development' has become synonymous with the cultivation of performance strengths. While this Framework warns against the instrumentalisation of character inherent in such an equation, it must be stressed that just as character can be impoverished by the over-estimation of performance strengths, it can be damaged by their under-appreciation. Subscribing to a moral virtue does not suffice, for example, without the confidence to exhibit it, and the resilience to bounce back from failures to actualise the motivational goals of the virtue.
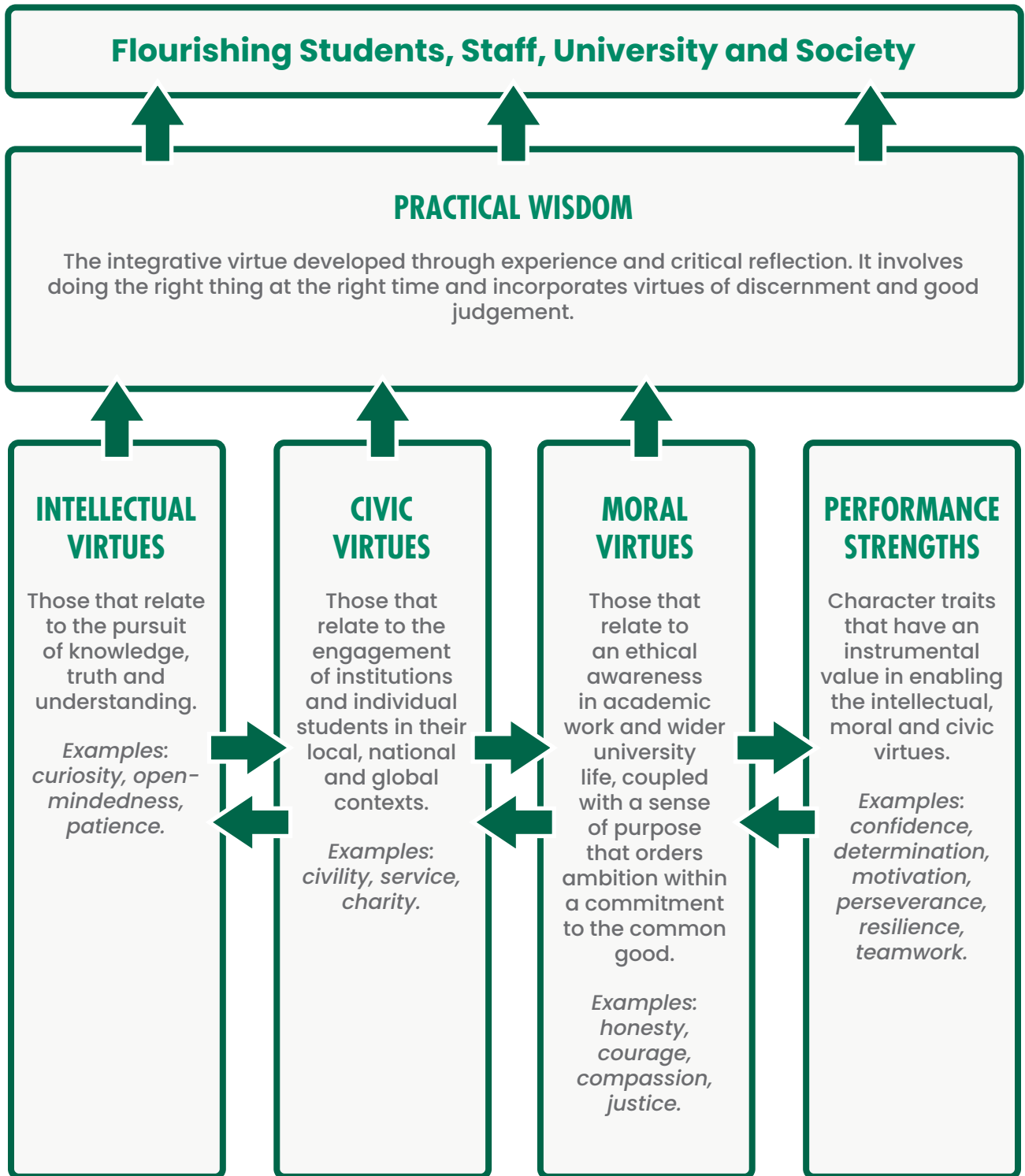
A fundamental character virtue at the university level is practical wisdom *(phronesis)*. Practical wisdom is an intellectual meta-virtue that binds together and integrates the intellectual, civic, moral and performance virtues. It is the overall quality of knowing what to want and what not to want when the demands of two or more virtues collide, and to integrate such demands into an acceptable course of action. For example, virtues relating to entrepreneurialism might seem to conflict with virtues of service and care. Practical wisdom is the capacity to reason well regarding the right thing to do, and to integrate competing emotional, motivational and situational pressures into an appropriate course of action.

Living with practical wisdom entails considered deliberation, well-founded judgement and the vigorous enactment of decisions. The ability to learn from experience (mistakes and failure as well as success) is at its centre. To live with practical wisdom is to be open-minded and to recognise the true variety of things and of situations to be experienced. Practical wisdom entails the active, thoughtful pursuit of what is right and good and is cultivated through experience and reflective deliberation. It comes into its own in higher education as students take ownership of their identity and purpose in the world.

Character in Higher Education: Key Principles

- The cultivation of character is integral to the core research, educational and civic purpose of universities.

- Good higher education is good character education; it helps equip students for work and life.

- Character contributes to human and societal flourishing and is therefore not simply the private concern of the student.

- Character education equips students with the intellectual, civic and moral virtues to make wise choices and live well within the framework of a democratic society.

- Students should be free to critically decide how they pursue their character development and put the virtues into practice.

- Character can be caught (e.g. through role-modelling) and taught at universities, but it should ultimately be sought by students themselves.

- Universities have a responsibility to prepare students for their professional lives; this requires intellectual, moral and civic virtues alongside qualities that improve performance.

- Many universities make it their purpose to educate responsible citizens and leaders who will contribute positively to the challenges of a rapidly changing world; character education is essential to this task.

- Character education is culturally responsive; it is not the possession of a single philosophical tradition, but is emphasised in many cultures and can draw on resources from diverse traditions.

- A focus on character and values helps engender a feeling among students that they 'belong' within their university.

- To develop a sense of agency, students must become aware of what they can do with what they learn; a sense of empowerment comes from having successfully applied their knowledge to authentic and important problems in the world.

- A university culture that enables positive relationships, civic participation, and self-determination facilitates the acquisition of good character.

Flourishing Students, Staff, University and Society

PRACTICAL WISDOM

The integrative virtue developed through experience and critical reflection. It involves doing the right thing at the right time and incorporates virtues of discernment and good judgement.

INTELLECTUAL VIRTUES

Those that relate to the pursuit of knowledge, truth and understanding.

Examples: curiosity, open-mindedness, patience.

CIVIC VIRTUES

Those that relate to the engagement of institutions and individual students in their local, national and global contexts.

Examples: civility, service, charity.

MORAL VIRTUES

Those that relate to an ethical awareness in academic work and wider university life, coupled with a sense of purpose that orders ambition within a commitment to the common good.

Examples: honesty, courage, compassion, justice.

PERFORMANCE STRENGTHS

Character traits that have an instrumental value in enabling the intellectual, moral and civic virtues.

Examples: confidence, determination, motivation, perseverance, resilience, teamwork.

Virtues can be helpfully classified in distinct but overlapping categories, relating to different aspects of higher education.

- **Intellectual virtues** relate to the pursuit of truth, knowledge and understanding that is central to the kinds of higher-level inquiry that characterises university teaching and research. These include critical thinking, intellectual humility, open-mindedness, and curiosity.

- **Civic virtues** concern the engagement of institutions and individual students in their local, national and global contexts. These include service, civility, hospitality, citizenship, and charity.

- **Moral virtues** relate to the need for students to have a clear ethical awareness in their academic work and wider university life, as well as a sense of purpose that does not end with their own interests, but orders their ambition within a commitment to the common good. Moral virtues are important in connection to issues such as research integrity and respectful engagement with others. They are also essential for a flourishing campus and communal life. These include justice, courage, honesty, humility, and compassion.

- **Performance strengths** concern the character traits that have an instrumental value in enabling the intellectual, moral and civic virtues. These include resilience, determination, motivation and teamwork.

- **Practical wisdom** is an intellectual meta-virtue that guides the other virtues. The cultivation of practical wisdom holds different virtues together, navigating along a medial path between an excess and deficiency of character, and it governs the outworking of virtue in practical action. Building on character traits cultivated through habituation in earlier years, practical wisdom re-evaluates those traits critically, allowing them to share in a person's overall capacities to reason. One of its core functions is to assess the relative weight of competing values, courses of action and emotions in order to discern the path most conducive to personal and societal flourishing.

ANSWERING OBJECTIONS

Of course, there are complexities and legitimate concerns that make the idea of character formation as an aim of higher education a more difficult prospect when compared to primary or secondary schooling. Students are beyond the age of majority and have already been shaped by their earlier education and upbringing. Universities are diverse, with students from around the world and across the philosophical and religious traditions in which questions of values and virtues are ultimately rooted. The dominant philosophy of higher education prioritises a concern for personal autonomy and exhibits a pervasive nervousness regarding the danger of indoctrination.

However, while there are important challenges to consider, above all the avoidance of indoctrination and the respect for student autonomy, this Framework is not situated in a theoretical vacuum when it comes to character formation in universities. Firstly, there are certain disciplines within universities where characterological concerns are, so to speak, woven into their very fabric: namely, disciplines aimed at developing virtuous (effective and ethical) professionals in areas such as teaching, medicine, nursing, law, social work and business (Jubilee Centre, 2016).

Secondly, while it should be readily acknowledged that some university students are engaged in areas of study where personal character development is not of the same intrinsic concern, all university courses, be they in arts and humanities, social sciences or STEM subjects, form the character of those who participate in them (Kiss and Euben, 2010). The question is not whether, but what qualities of character are being formed by university education, and how intentionally this formative aspect of education is undertaken. Moreover, all university disciplines have some ethical and characterological expectations attached to them, most notably in terms of research ethics and norms of good academic practice.

Thirdly, the means of character education must be appropriate to the context. While directed habituation and emulation (taught and caught) may be appropriate in earlier schooling, the focus at university level turns to character sought through the student's own critical thinking and reflection. The role of the educator is as a guide to help students to reflect for themselves on questions of who they are and want to become. It is this personal reflection on character and its autonomous development and integration in an overall mindset or identity that is conducive to flourishing as an adult. In other words, what is called 'character education' at the university level distinguishes itself fairly sharply from the development of character at earlier stages of the educational system.

HOW TO CULTIVATE CHARACTER IN HIGHER EDUCATION

If the cultivation of character in universities is inevitable, even desirable, then far better— and in keeping with the nature of university inquiry—for it be open and intentional. This applies both to the specific virtues of character that universities promote and to the appropriateness of the methods adopted to cultivate them. A key question is: How can character legitimately be cultivated in modern, plural universities? As there is no single model of what a university is, there is no off-the-shelf blueprint. There is, however, a long history of philosophical inquiry and much recent work in psychology and education on which to draw.

Aristotle argued that virtues are cultivated relationally and dynamically, by emulating role-models and by way of repeated practice: 'We become builders, for instance, by building, and we become harpists by playing the harp. Similarly, then, we become just by doing just actions' (Aristotle, 1999, 1103a34-1103b2). This idea of habituation is supported by recent work in cognitive and social psychology and acts as the foundation of character education. Character traits are not passively possessed but are actively and ongoingly cultivated through practice. However, while habituation is foundational, the emphasis in higher education, where students are mature adults, must be on rational, reflective and self-directed habituation rather than the kinds of copying suitable in earlier years. The cultivation of practical wisdom by reflection on personal experience comes into its own in university contexts. Students may lack the life experience to attain such wisdom fully during their university years, but they can certainly learn to appreciate its value and develop life practices that will lead them towards it.

A synthesis of research in education, philosophy and psychology (Lamb *et al.*, 2021) has identified seven methods of character development that can be applied in university contexts: 'habituation through practice; reflection on personal experience; engagement with virtuous exemplars; dialogue that increases virtue literacy; conversations about situational variables; moral reminders that make norms salient; and friendships of mutual accountability.'

If students are to be helped along the path of cultivating desirable character qualities and practical wisdom, then universities should think about how they are making their character education intentional, planned, conscious and reflective. This means they must consider how character is caught, taught and sought.

> ### Character and practical wisdom can be...
>
> - **Caught:** the university community of both staff and students provide the example, culture and inspirational influence in a positive ethos that motivates and promotes character development.
>
> - **Taught:** the university provides educational experiences across campus that equip students with the language, knowledge, understanding, skills and attributes that enable character development.
>
> - **Sought:** the university provides varied opportunities that help students over time to seek, desire and freely pursue their character development.

WHERE IN UNIVERSITIES DOES CHARACTER EDUCATION BELONG?

The cultivation of character can be a focus in specific contexts within higher education. Where virtues are important for learning in a particular discipline, they can rightly be emphasised within specific programmes of study. General education or extra-curricular programmes can help students to reflect on their purpose and develop character necessary for responsible citizenship and leadership. However, the formative nature of universities as institutions means character education cannot be confined to those contexts alone. For universities to take seriously their role in cultivating character, a broad consideration of university life is required:

- Culture: What are the values of the university? How are they embodied and sustained in practice? Do institutional practices, incentives, and social expectations support or undermine the cultivation of character?

- Teaching: What place is given in formal or informal teaching for the consideration of ethical frameworks and concepts of character and personal formation? How do university educators embody the virtues of inquiry that their discipline demands and promotes? What role might the consideration of character play in moving teaching from transactional to transformational?

- Online engagement: Online and blended learning offers the potential for new flexibility and extended reach in higher education. At its best, it can enable a higher degree of personal interaction between faculty and students, but it can also result in teaching and learning becoming more functional and less formative. How does character education feature in university plans for expanded online provision?

- Research: What research is being done in the university that relates to the cultivation of character? Are aspects of research relating to character visible and valued? What virtues are required of good researchers in different fields? How are these cultivated in research ethics curricula?

- Extracurricular activities: What role do extracurricular activities, such as sport, music, drama and leadership of student societies, play in character formation? Is the formative role of such activities valued and properly supported?

- Student support: How can student support services be proactive in promoting positive character formation? What character qualities are needed to help students successfully navigate the pressures of university life? How are personal virtues used as a resource to help students protect their mental health?

- Careers services: Is there a working awareness of the importance of character for professional practice? How do advisors approach questions of service and vocation? How are students encouraged and supported to identify and cultivate the character required for good practice in their future career? How can alumni help students understand the importance of character and wisdom in the workplace?

- Admissions: Is the university open about the character qualities it seeks to cultivate along with other graduate attributes? How are the character qualities relevant to an applicant's potential in their chosen field of study taken into account in admissions?

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PUTTING THE FRAMEWORK INTO PRACTICE

This Framework is not intended to provide a single blueprint for character education in universities. The following suggestions are provided to help university leaders and staff—in partnership with students—to advance character education in their own context.

University leaders should consider:

- establishing a working group of staff and students to consider the nature and place of character education in their institution;

- making their institution's vision for character education explicit to all staff, students, potential applicants and the wider public;

- detailing and making publicly available the virtues that are central to the life of the university;

- ensuring that their vision focusses not solely on enhancing students' knowledge of their subject and development of skills for their future career, but also on developing character;

- establishing groups distributed throughout the institution to ensure that their character education vision is visible and implemented;

- offering professional development to staff, particularly in student support roles, that provides advice on how to support their students' character development;

- introducing widespread student leadership development programmes that focus on character, as well as strategies and skills.

University staff should consider:

- how they might ensure that they place a genuine focus in their teaching on cultivating intellectual virtues and practical wisdom;

- detailing the virtues that are central in their discipline and the associated programmes of study;

- helping students to make an explicit link between ethical practice in employment and the theory and practice of character development and importance of practical wisdom;

- enhancing the quality of personal tutoring, mentoring and pastoral care for students, ensuring they focus on the development of qualities associated with individual flourishing;

- encouraging new students to reflect on what they hope to gain from their university education in order to help them clarify their sense of purpose;

- providing students with real life opportunities to 'test' their character – through teaching and learning activities, as well as extracurricular activities such as volunteering;

- providing feedback to students that focusses on their character and wisdom, as well as their performance;

- helping students make the link between their own character development and how they respond to local, national and global challenges.

CONCLUSION

The value of higher education is seen in the lives of university students – not only in what they do or jobs they go into, but in what they contribute to society and who they become. Nervousness that character education may transgress proper respect for student autonomy is understandable, but for universities to neglect character education on such grounds is short-sighted. Universities shape the character of their students whether they realise it or not. The question is not whether but what qualities of character are being formed through higher education and how intentionally this formative aspect of education is undertaken. This Framework has presented an intentional and aspirational approach to character education in universities that respects the autonomy and diversity of student populations and contributes to the central concerns of higher education. If universities are truly eager to help their students as well as wider society to flourish, then character education cannot be neglected.

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