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Markers of 'authentic place'? : the significance of degrees, awards and qualifications of higher education systems

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Abstract

Although the power to award degrees lies at the heart of the concept of a university, neither it nor degrees themselves have attracted much scholarly attention. The paper contends that award-conferment provides an interface of major importance between higher education and its environment; and that the awards themselves can serve as rich and informative (yet often coded) indicators of the relationship between the two. For awards to be seen in this way, the paper argues, two conditions are required: the conceptual independence of awards in their own right has to be recognised as entities distinct from courses of study; and instrumentalist views have to be sufficiently prevalent to make it meaningful to treat an award as specifying a set of purposes and intended outcomes (that is to say, as an 'end' potentially achievable by various 'means'). These conditions, it is suggested, only tend to arise in particular social circumstances, specifically those of mass higher education. Having illustrated these points by considering certain changes of usage in the terms used for higher education awards (degree, qualification, etc), the paper concludes with a tentative sketch of

26.7.2024

a framework by which to analyse the various ways in which awards might contribute to the workings of HE as a system. (HRK / Abstract übernommen)