A Critical Assessment of the Impact Agenda

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To critically assess the impact agenda of theological education it is useful to start by distinguishing between different categories of impact. We have on the one hand *instrumental* impact, that can be sub-divided in relation to a) input and output, b) impact on church and society and c) impact related to competences, and on the other *intrinsic* impact. The ICETE C-15 Consultation engaged primarily with the first two sub-divisions of instrumental impact, and we will here engage with the latter two, looking first at instrumental impact related to competences in the lives of graduates and then at intrinsic impact that points us in a completely different direction and away from utilitarian ends, claiming that theological education is intrinsically valuable and should not be measured in terms of its missiological usefulness alone.

Impact through competences

A widespread trend in recent years has been to study competences to assess whether what is being developed by academics in schools matches up with what employers expect and with what graduates need in their prospective fields of occupation. Although there is a danger of competences driving out knowledge (Mulder, 2007) and of a utilitarian view of education (Teichler *et at*, 1995), there is no denying that the complex realities that graduates face today demand not only complete knowledge but knowing competence. In the last decades, competences have become a key concept within in the European Higher Education Area and are a central feature in the official documents of the Bologna Process (Weigel, 2007; Gonzales and Wagenaar, 2003; Tuning, 2006).

One very significant project that has been of direct inspiration to this research proposal is the 2000 Tuning Project, a Europe-wide consultation involving over 7,000 respondents, 101 universities and 16 countries and including employers, graduates and academic staff/faculty in identifying the 30 most important competences that *all* degree programmes in *all* subject areas of higher education should develop. A list of these competences can readily be found online[1] and include competences like ability to work in a

[1] http://www.unideusto.org/tuningeu/competences/generic.html

team, spirit of enterprise, ability identify and solve problems, basic computing ability and project management capacity, just to mention a few.

There are at least four advantages in assessing impact through competences. The first is that it represents an additional way of looking at output in the lives of students in a that goes beyond knowledge and understanding that are typically caught on the radar screen of 'grades', GPA, research output and transcripts. Secondly, it can enrich output evaluation and nuance it with dimensions of character education. This is because many competences are actually rooted in character traits and thus revive an ancient tradition of character education present since Paideia and largely lost through accreditation and academic captivity of theological education.

A third advantage of assessing impact through competences is that it reflects a commitment to listen deeply to the voice of society that we claim to serve. In assessing our impact, we must in fact ask whether society actually recognizes the impact we are trying to make or whether we are speaking different languages and reflecting different values. Competence language gives theological educators a 'fresh pair of eyes' that come from engaging theologically with societal categories. If, for example, society is telling us that what is needed are individuals who are competent in decision making, problem solving and working in international contexts, we can demonstrate a recognizable impact in society by showing that *because* of our educational input our graduates are individuals who can make decisions, solve problems and work in international contexts.

Finally, competences represent a better measuring tool to assess impact in society. One of the major questions raised by the impact agenda is 'How do we really know that theological education is impacting society?' Societal input is, in fact, problematic in proposed methodologies of measurement. Populations being surveyed about their impressions may be wrong or conditioned. Our data indicating whether 'society is improving' as a result of theological education, assumes an agreed definition of improvement, needs to deal with serious variables to know that it is actually theological education that has determined improvement and not other factors, and must include consideration of constraining factors and debilitating contexts.

In linking impact in church and society to the agency of theological education there may also a modernistic view based on a mechanistic ontology of reality operating in the background. This can lead to the (debatably wrong) assumption that if we get the curriculum right, we will always get certain results in society. But in a fallen world it may not be so

simple. Assessing competences is a more realistic impact tool where we measure the impact of education on the individual and his/her relation to what is needed in society, rather than measuring the actual impact in society. So, for example, we realize that in a community that needs the capacity to generate new ideas and solve problems, we may not be able to establish whether that community has grown in this capacity and if theological education graduates have really made a difference, but what we can assess is the degree to which that capacity is important for the community and to what degree theological education is producing graduates with that capacity. Assessing competences thus proves to be more modest approach as it does not tie itself into actually measuring change but is satisfied in producing curricula and graduates that are well matched in priority to the needed competences in current societies. If assessing only resources, input and output is too little, assessing impact in society may be too much. Assessing impact on competences sits in the middle.

There are many ways of measuring impact of competences in theological education and it is beyond the scope of this article to list them, beyond an initial suggestion of three possible approaches. The first is to survey graduates at graduation and ask them to compare their competences on entry and exit which, when correlated, will allow an assessment of whether and where theological education has made a difference. A second possible approach is to survey graduates a few years after graduation and ask them about their competences on exiting theological education compared to those they have actually needed in life, society and work. This will diagnose whether theological education is making the right kind of impact. The third, and most complex approach, is to correlate surveys of graduates, academics and employers to gain a clear vision of overdeveloped and underdeveloped competences as well as the differences in perceptions and priorities of academics and employers.

Intrinsic, non-utilitarian impact

In this second section I will argue that instrumental impact, however it is determined, is an insufficient metric for theological education and that intrinsic impact where engagement with theology is seen as good in itself must be given a place. I will briefly mention a modern debate, then provide an ethical argument, an ancient primary source, a modern primary source and finally conclude with a biblical narrative.

First the modern debate. There is currently a discussion raging in UK higher education as in 2014 the REF (Research Excellence Framework) responsible for funding research in HE included 'impact' as a significant element in the framework criteria. In brief, the kind of

research that is most likely to get funded and classified as 'excellent' is research that brings about positive impact on society and economy. Debates have included issues around measuring the sheer complexity of how research actually makes impact, the discrimination among disciplines, the downplay of work that is exploratory and theoretical and the specter of prioritizing lower over higher quality work. This is all to say that the utilitarian assessment of education is framed within a broader contentious debate.

My ethical argument looks to ethical theories to find answers to the question of makes theological education 'good' and of value? Two main theories will assist us, the first is utilitarianism and the second deontology. A utilitarian, instrumental judgment of theological education will claim that theological education (as any other object of action) has value if it is useful. Theological education therefore is good if it leads to a better society, to making the world a better place and if it serves the purposes of welfare, utility and fitness for purpose. Typical utilitarians would include personal happiness, pleasure and wellbeing as measures good, but as evangelicals we tend to shy away and prefer missiological measures. But here looms the question: do our missiological commitments restrict our vision of theological education to a strictly utilitarian set of judgments? If we look at the mission statements of our colleges they are about about transforming church and society, about moving God's kingdom forward, about service and training leaders. But what are we really saying? Are we saying that what is worthwhile is what serves others and the world and that even areas like spiritual formation that may benefits our students during their studies are really instrumental to the outward benefit of the church and world? If this is so, then it appears as if theological education is elegantly commodified to the market of Christian service where the missiological GDP of the Kingdom is the main assessment parameter.

But there is something missing in this picture, as becomes apparent when we take a deontological view that links good to duty (the root 'deon', meaning 'one must'). This view suggests that educating theologically is a duty because it is right and therefore that it is good regardless of whether it leads to a better society, to making the world a better place or to any instrumental purpose. Theological education is simply the fitting thing to do in this world, rooted in ontology and the dutiful relationship between man with a rational mind and receptive spirit and a revealing God who wishes to be known. As Kelsey reminds us, theological education is basically about theology – the understanding of God. Of the different assumptions listed by Kelsey of what it is to understand God, perhaps the way of contemplation, where fulfillment of human life is disengaged from any sort of political life and

contemplation of 'real reality', is one that most of us would endorse in our theological schools (Kelsey„ *p.* 35). Contemplation and knowing God thus appear divested of any instrumental use and loom large as basic creature duties.

Intrinsic impact, contemplation and knowing God as a basic duty calls into question hierarchies between *theoria* and practical and productive understanding, and here we turn to an ancient source and in particular to Aristotle. Not enough can be said in fact of the impact of Aristotle's on the shape of education in Europe as his *Lyceum* was destined to become the main model both for Greek and Roman education and then later for medieval European universities that in turn have served as templates for much theological education. The curriculum in the *Lyceum* featured a rigid disciplinary hierarchy for Aristotle ranked knowledge in terms of three sciences: *theoretical*, *practical* and *poietical* (Trombino 1997: 336). Of these the *theoretical* sciences ranked highest as it had to do with the pure contemplation of truth, which included metaphysics, physics, and mathematics (it is important to note that physics and mathematics were studied without any practical relations to life but as pure fact of harmonious reality to be contemplated). The *practical* sciences, namely ethics and politics, ranked second as knowledge that could guide human action, and the *poietical* sciences ranked last, because they were the knowledge of doing, representing the disciplines that were farthest from contemplation and closest to the concrete preoccupations of life. This hierarchy rests on the basic question of man's identity[2] concerning whic Aristotle claimed that the most distinguishing feature of man is his rational soul. It follows that, if rationality is what makes men different from animals, the love of knowledge and the search of truth is the highest function of human life. This basic syllogism explains why theoretical knowledge is uppermost in Aristotle's curriculum and why the primarily concern of education was rational contemplation and not the acquisition of scientific knowledge. [3] Learning for Aristotle was therefore not an instrumental mean but an activity of intrinsic value that led to *eudeaimonia* - human happiness. According to Aristotle, the more we abstract in metaphysical theory, the more we are human. To seek truth for itself, with no further/exterior motives is the final end, "…that which is always desirable in itself and never for the sake of something else." (*Nicomachean Ethics* Book I, 7). Theoretical education, according to Aristotle, would lead to happiness because it is desirable in itself and can be seen as that which is "final

[2] In the *Protrepticus* the young Aristotle lays out an anthropological stance that would deeply influence Cicero, Augustine and many modern thinkers.

[3] Plato similarly prioritized philosophy (dialectic) as the supreme study, followed by the study of the sciences to would provoke reflection and lead to the ideal world and. lastly, the training of the body. The chronological order was important for Plato, beginning with bodily training of children, training in the sciences for youth and, finally, dialectic. Progression from one level to the next was subject to distinction in character and mind and fitness for higher studies.

without qualification". Applied to theological education one would conclude that to *see* God ranks higher than to *serve* God.

We turn finally and briefly to a contemporary source featuring taxonomy of existing educational goals found in *Educating for Shalom* by Nicholas Wolterstorff. Although not related specifically to theological education, one can easily make the connection and see that, of his six goals, three could be classified as instrumental and three as intrinsic. Among the instrumental goals we find the *Christian service model* where we train students to enter Christian service, the *socialization model* where we equip students (especially the poor) to contribute to utility and to the welfare of nations and communities, and Wolterstorff's *Shalom model* in which we challenge, nourish and equip students to address the wounds of humanity in a prophetic vision of shalom. The three broadly intrinsic goals instead, include the *Christian humanist model* where we initiate students into the cultural heritage of humanity to make them flourish, the *maturation model* where we create free spaces where students can discover and become un-indoctrinated individuals and the *academic discipline model* where we introduce students to objective theoretical knowledge of the workings of the world and thus fulfil a cultural mandate. There is no space to engage with each of these models nor to apply them to theological education in particular, but the taxonomy in itself makes a point and that is that the assessment horizon is broader than single models of instrumental measurement.

So what should we conclude? Should we try to assess which of Wolterstorff's models is the right one? Need we engage with Aristotle to determine whether theory is truly higher than practice and societal impact? Should we privilege deontology and duty to know God over utilitarian service to our neighbor? Should we skew any instrumental impact agenda in favor of intrinsic values at the risk of becoming self-referential and irrelevant in our world? The well known biblical narrative of Martha and Mary with Jesus found in Luke 10 provides a framework for these questions. We have here two women, one active and one contemplative. One perhaps looking for instrumental impact and the other for intrinsic impact. Which of these two women is 'right'? The answer is that both were right for both women were loving Jesus. Although to be fair, the weight of the narrative actually has Mary winning the day, we should be cautious in transforming this narrative into a normative, for Jesus is responding to Martha's complaint based on her wrong hierarchy, and so paradoxically reverts Martha's hierarchy to enhance the value of what Mary's approach. We would however be hard pressed to argue that Scripture normatively has this kind of hierarchy (or any hierarchy indeed). We

simply have both. As the ICETE C-15 Consultation on the Impact of Theological Education has been largely a ‘Martha conference’ focusing instrumental impact, this is a ‘Mary paper’ that reminds us of the depth and breadth of our horizons.

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