Today's graduates must be of good character

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Today's graduates need to be equipped with good character as well as a degree if they are to succeed in the job market, according to new report presented to the House of Lords on Monday 23 November 2009.

The report, Graduates of Character, is the fourth in a series of national Learning for Life research projects. Each report has examined the development of character during the education journey, from early years through to higher education into employment.

The ground breaking research, undertaken by Dr James Arthur, from the University of Birmingham, and Dr Kenneth Wilson and Dr Ray Godfrey from Canterbury Christ Church University, discovered that when it came to employing graduates, a good character was just as important as academic excellence.

Employers not only look for graduates who are well informed and competent; but they also looked for a person of integrity, who was trustworthy, responsible, loyal and committed to life long learning.

The research consequently raises questions for universities and employers, including how the higher education sector should address the development of personal and civic responsibility and should businesses accept responsibility for the character of their employees.

British Telecom, Tesco, Price Waterhouse Coopers and DTZ took part in the Graduates of Character research, alongside four UK universities – Canterbury Christ Church University, King's College University of Cambridge, University of Essex and Cass Business School.

Dr James Arthur explained: "There is pressure on universities to produce graduates qualified to meet the demands of the British economy in a competitive global economy. And together with the growing cost of higher education to the student and the state, there is an impact on the public perception of the role and purpose of higher education.

"There are hard questions ahead for universities as they seek to understand and meet the needs of employers. Not unnaturally, they are tempted to focus on academic performance, but where in a university's structure is the duty to form a student's character and develop a sense of responsibility? How does a university assess its performance in this area? Does a contemporary UK university education adequately prepare the student for life in the broadest sense?

"A close relationship between higher education and business is essential if they are to fulfil the needs of a global society, not just a global economy. Educating for academic skills alone is not sufficient in helping graduates prepare for civic commitment or to understand their responsibilities as a member of a community."

The five research papers will culminate in an overall 'Learning for Life' study, a major project largely funded by the John Templeton Foundation and Porticus UK.

Learning for Life is an ambitious initiative with few parallels in Britain, as there has not yet been a coherent exploration of character development in all educational phases and on into employment.

The overall Learning for Life sample has involved 4000 children and young people, 300 parents and 100 teachers tracked over a two-year period in Birmingham, Bristol, Canterbury and London, as well as in-depth interviews with over 85 undergraduates and 65 graduate employees.

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