

A Wake Up Call for International Relations?

Written by Stephen McGlinchey

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STEPHEN MCGLINCHEY, AUG 17 2009

Trina Thompson, an Information Technology graduate of Monroe College in New York, is suing her institution after failing to find a job four months after graduation[1]. Taking a step back from the actual case at hand, this story raises a very important issue that universities and colleges throughout the western world are failing and/or refusing to face, an issue that sits at the heart of international relations (IR) courses. That issue is the relevance of the degrees offered to real world usefulness. Put simply, academic institutions cannot assume they have an immunity from the future progress of their ex students just because they have checked all the standard career advice and due diligence boxes. Is it not perfectly reasonable for a student to assume that a major financial investment in their education will find them suitable employment?

Bringing this into an IR focus, an article written by Stephen Walt in 2005 is curiously interesting[2]. Walt, one of IR's foremost scholars, notes that a disproportionately small number of academic experts with an IR background find their way into policy making positions in contemporary American politics due to perceived detachment between international relations theory and day to day policy making reality. Walt notes that there is a panel of PhD holding economic experts advising the federal government, but no such dedicated equivalent in foreign policy. He laments further that IR scholars are not just ignored by policy makers, but also by other academics. One can presume here that this 'hazing' of IR scholars is due to the field's relative newcomer status in the political sciences and its mixed, often hybridised methodological approaches – borrowing heavily from other more established fields. This is understandable for a discipline that seeks to cover such varied and immense terrain as the politics of the international world and its peoples. And, whilst Walt uses his article to call for better, more robust theory as a solution – that is not good enough in itself. IR as a discipline is (presumably) about much more than robust theory and academic excellence. IR is a real world facing, practical subject which attracts many students deeply interested in the practical problems facing their world. If we are to truly emerge from "the cult of irrelevance"[3] then a continued self serving immersion in complex international relations theory will not serve that end.

Students graduating from IR degrees have been educated in a discipline that has no exact real world employment correlation (such as a degree in accountancy, for example). In fact, the skills acquired and the horizons opened via an IR degree are so expansive on one hand and yet narrow on the other hand that said graduates may find themselves disoriented and confused at exactly 'what to do'. Of course, this is no different than many of the social sciences and humanities based degrees. However, IR courses have the ability and potential flexibility to move beyond complex theory and world history based teaching and move into real practical areas that will give students real hands on skills and develop their talents. Major focus on this type of teaching along with a gap year structure (or similar) comprising of internships/placements ought to be institutionalised into all IR courses and directly integrated with the teaching. Firstly, it would give IR a better image both to employers and to policy makers, addressing the concerns mentioned earlier in this article by increasing the usefulness of the education received. Secondly it would re-invigorate and legitimise a discipline which desperately needs to find a solid real world focus outside of its various deep theoretical debates. If international relations is to be taken seriously academically, and in global politics, it needs to focus on producing students that can go straight into many career paths and act as ambassadors for its merits. At the very least IR needs to focus as much on the gap between the value of its courses and direct real world usefulness as it does on the flaws and conflicts amongst its theoretical approaches. A subject that is so indispensable in the modern world can settle for no less.

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University is no longer a golden ticket to a good job, and nor should it be. Nevertheless, if university courses that deal with real world concerns, not abstract issues, do not either prepare students for definite employment or further academic study/vocational development (which then leads to definite employment) what is the point in offering those courses? Picking up any prospectus for a university, one will find many career paths listed alongside every course. Often, the details will include references to certain students going on to high flying careers as a result of the completion of their degree. Firstly, this is misleading. Upon graduating, many students find themselves unemployed and without any direct useful skills they can sell to an employer. Secondly, universities often send out questionnaires to former students asking them whether they have found employment. What these questionnaires sometimes omit when they are condensed and released for public consumption is the large number of former students working in unskilled jobs, rather than working in career type positions as a result of skills learned at university. Additionally, it fails to distinguish clearly those who have moved on to clear career paths as a result of training/experience gained during employment, rather than as a result of skills earned during their degree – which begs the question was their degree worth anything to their career path at all? If not, should a university not be obliged to tell students interested in working in a field such as global governance or policy making to investigate a series of internships instead of a presumably useless (yet academically interesting) degree?

The bottom line is; should a university continue to ‘sell’ courses in an area that will produce no tangible employment prospects? Is this ethical? If so, that is the very definition of academic in its pejorative sense. We can do better.

[1] http://www.nypost.com/seven/08022009/news/regionalnews/sheep_kinned_182607.htm

[2] Walt, S. ‘The Relationship Between Theory and Policy in International Relations’, *Annual Review of Political Science*, Volume 8, 2005. pp. 23-49.

[3] http://walt.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2009/04/15/the_cult_of_irrelevance

About the author:

Dr Stephen McGlinchey is the Editor-in-Chief and Publisher of E-International Relations and Senior Lecturer of International Relations at UWE Bristol. His publications include *Foundations of International Relations* (Bloomsbury 2022), *International Relations* (2017), *International Relations Theory* (2017) and *US Arms Policies Towards the Shah's Iran* (Routledge 2021, 2014). You can find him on twitter @mcglincheyst or LinkedIn.