

Notes from North of the Tweed: Do we need a new way of designing Scottish higher education policy?

September 26, 2017 by [SRHE News Blog](#) [Leave a comment](#)

By Vicky Gunn

The Brexit vote seems to have somewhat taken the wind out of the sails of higher education policy in Scotland. The Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF2) crossed the border in a small foray. Five institutions (St Andrews, Dundee, Abertay, Heriot Watt and RGU)[\[i\]](#) popped themselves into the Whitehall metrics melee and the SFC sent an encyclical reminding the sector that the Quality Enhancement Framework (QEF) was still the Scottish Government's preferred (and legally required) approach to quality. Longitudinal Education Outcomes (LEO)[\[ii\]](#) emerged as the new dataset to appraise and the Vice Principals Learning & Teaching had to turn their minds to what it means for Scottish sector to have one, three, and five year details of income, tax, pensions, and type of work, at a disciplinary level. Thus, after a little lion rampant, Universities Scotland TEF working group settled back into business as usual, facing the Department of Education with the now normalised questions regarding devolved metrics' divergences. We have yet to discuss the grade inflation metric[\[iii\]](#), but planners everywhere will be running analytics to see what increases in the top levels of degrees Scotland has seen since 2010.

The same sense of 'new normal' becalm cannot be said of Scotland's approach to its cultural policy, however, and it is to this that I briefly reach. The current round of cultural policy creation is bedecked with local consultations aimed at catching the voices of all layers of Scottish society. It takes the best of social innovation processes as understood within the domain of 'post-product' design[\[iv\]](#) and uses them to effect change through the voice of those benefitting from centrally resourced creative Arts. It recognises that creative impact is a form of soft power that underpins social well-being. In approach, it is not dissimilar to methods used to enhance public engagement with healthcare evidence and funding. Whether the Minister for Culture's (Fiona Hyslop, SNP) process to generate the next creative arts plan is an attempt to drive the direction of Scotland's creatives[\[v\]](#) or a sensible approach to participatory democracy (aligning funding for culture with the wants and needs of the people of Scotland) is not what I wish to explore. Rather I turn to the process of policy generation and ask: why is this not how higher education policy is developed?

To clarify what I mean, consider the following. Currently within the Scottish HE policy landscape, the space and timescales of HE policy are predominantly socio-economic (they inhabit business and economic discourses and use annualized timescales as frameworks for audit). As measurements from economic policy are translated into yearly performance indicators for HE governance and regulation, and big-data systems are prototyped to operationalize visions of automated government decision making, HE policy makers are forced into a relatively constrained focus on five specific pillars of activity:

- Designing appropriate policy for a student funded, government driven, value for money consumer service;
- Constructing policy for government funded work-force production;
- Using policy to respond to the opportunities provided by data management advances (such as big data and metrics)
- Appropriating policy that has emerged from globalization;
- Emphasizing policy for government funded innovation and knowledge exchange that appears disconnected from the day-to-day educational role.

This reactive context establishes two clear trends. Firstly, HE policy is stabilized into a particular technocratic space, offering disproportionate influence to a very specific group of people who have the government's ear. Consciously or not, the frames of reference that are

drawn on to create a coherent higher education agenda are instrumentally limited. Whereas health and culture have a balancing wing of participatory democracy, higher education policy is stuck in deliberative agendas with very little public engagement on the role universities play socio-culturally. As a result, HEIs cannot depend on marshalling groups of noisy locals to their cause. Instead, cultural narrative is reduced to socio-economic, state-wide enterprise. And this while the Scottish Government, through its arm's length body (the SFC), begins to explore what Whitehall's outcomes metrics might provide in terms of skills and workforce key performance indicators.

Secondly, lessons learned from proactive, socially-holistic policy design are absent. The notion of higher education as a socio-cultural driver for the good that needs to be understood by those who access both its immediate and less tangibly immediate benefits is missing.^[vi] Indeed, with the absence of effective graphics and their underpinning aesthetics (a key part of social innovation design) we are dependent on a canvas increasingly dominated by text and numbers that is almost impenetrable except to those in university planning offices. Without practical activities such as scenario-based problem-solving (through simulation and gaming)^[vii] with local communities, maintaining an open communication about how universities work educationally for and beyond these communities will be increasingly difficult. To exemplify this point, I'd like reflect on the grade inflation metrics to be included within the next round of TEF. Whitehall is worried that the UK sector has been gaming degree outcomes in the face of league tables. Too many students are getting firsts. A simple analysis does indeed alight upon grade inflation.

There are, however, two other significant factors to take into consideration. One is better cross-institutional compliance with assessment enhancement practices, the other is student motivation. Arguably, the last seven years have seen a significant mainstreaming of attempts to improve assessment and feedback processes in direct connection to the tenaciously low metrics outcomes for this item of the NSS. In general, approaches such as curriculum mapping (see, for example, TESTA^[viii]) have proven positively impactful and additionally, in Scotland, we've had so much *focus on* assessment and feedback activity in the QEF that we are awash with relevant publications and case studies of the enhancements undertaken. Assessment rubrics and QAA demands to assess using the full range of a given assessment scale do positively influence learning (otherwise, we've been wasting our time complying with quality codes). If HEIs improve on the ambiguities of assessment as required by quality review, surely we'd expect a shift in grade distribution? External examiners (EE) could attest to this (and do so in exam boards as well as at subject review and institutional review. But, if one accepts the HEA's big EE^[ix] training project as an indicator of the rigour of the current EE process, of course, the public should be wary of their judgements).

Another way of understanding the grade distribution shift since 2010 is that the student body has become forced to take into account the cost of the degree *versus* not performing well enough to get a job to manage debt. Students in universities are chasing 2:1s as a result. They get more savvy about cues as to how to do better at the same time as increasing what they do in study terms. (This has been causing a problem for some graduate career programmes who worry the pressure to get the 2.1 is decreasing prospective candidates' ability to develop the wider attributes expected in a graduate career pathway.) The knock-on effect is that students with the potential for originality in the discipline, who previously didn't dedicate (and got top 2:1s), are now working their metaphorical socks off and getting firsts.

Taken together, these things result in what looks like grade inflation – rather than being viewed as evidence of improvements in the assessment processes and increases in students' pragmatism. The problem is, having made some of those improvements and seen student focus increase, it is harder to distinguish the top 2:1s from the borderline ones at the same time the better students have signposts to getting firsts. This is politically problematic because getting a first should be an almost heroic threshold to cross. Businesses don't like the idea of

grade inflation because it makes it harder for them to choose which student to take from the perspective of academic merit. It is an irony to me that the easiest way to reset the balance would be to ditch criteria-referenced, numerical-point scales and codes of assessment and go back to norm-referencing and only marking out of 65% of the full 100%.

Publicly, the material realities of learning and teaching in contemporary HEIs are becoming more ill-defined in the social imaginary. In turn, trust in the disciplines to self-regulate to the benefit of their communities becomes increasingly subject to the paranoias associated with times of political uncertainty. As a potential consequence, explicit clarity around the regional and community relationships between the sector and its locations are likely to be marginalised, if not transfigured into a moral battle between the public as good and the university as not so good. The higher education sector requires policy that recognises the social complexities of its situation as much as the economic values it should incorporate and to which it should respond.

And so I end with a question that I have asked elsewhere: *How can Scottish universities proactively measure the quality of enlargement and enrichment by their graduates of the communities in which they are located and how does this relate to experiencing higher education?*[x] If we fail to address this, socio-economic priorities will prove easily metrically managed indicators of our failures as much as of our successes, rather than merely a thread in a more holistic public discourse about why higher education matters.

SRHE member Professor Vicky Gunn is Head of Learning and Teaching at the Glasgow School of Art. Follow her on Twitter @StacyGray45

Notes

[i] For their submissions see: <http://www.hefce.ac.uk/tefoutcomes/>

[ii] Details on LEO: <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/graduate-outcomes-for-all-subjects-by-university>

[iii] Grade inflation metric:

https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/643701/TEF_Lessons_Learned_Summary_Policy_Document.pdf, p.4

[iv] For an excellent summary of *post-thing*, social design, see: Cameron Tonkinwise (2016) Committing to the Political Values of Post-Thing Centred Designing (Teaching Designers How to Design to Live Collaboratively), *Design and Culture*, 8:1, 139-154, pp. 141-144.

[v] *The Times*: 20th September 2017

[vi] Here I assume culture as a generator of a broader range of social commitments including but not exclusive to the creative arts. See, Paul Chatterton (1999) The cultural role of universities in the community: revisiting the university-community debate, *Environment & Planning*, 32: 165-181, for an earlier (prescient?) articulation of the cultural aspect to University and Community Cultural Relationships.

[vii] Mark Considine, Damon Alexander & Jenny Lewis (2014) Policy design as a craft: teasing out policy design expertise using a semi-experimental approach, *Policy Science*, 47: 209-225.

[viii] <https://www.testa.ac.uk>

[ix] HEA External Examiner development project: <https://www.heacademy.ac.uk/hefce-degree-standards>

[x] Vicky Gunn, July 2017. TEF Should be About Relationships, in Visions for the AlterniTEF – can we do TEF better? *WonkHE*: <http://wonkhe.com/blogs/wonkhe-presents-visions-for-the-alternitef/>