

Notes from North of the Tweed: Valuing our values

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In a recent publication, Mariana Mazzucato¹ pushes the reader to engage with a key dilemma related to modern day capitalist economics. ‘Value extraction’ often occurs after a government has valued work upfront through state investment and accountability regimes. The original investment was a result of the collective possibilities afforded by a mature taxation system and an understanding that accountability can drive positive social and economic outcomes (as well as perverse ones). The value that is extracted is then distributed to those already with both financial and social capital rather than redistributed back into the systems which produced the initial work via support from the state in the first place. This means that the social contract between the State and its workers (at all levels) effectively has the State pump prime activity, only to watch the fruits of these labours be inequitably shared.

I find this to be a useful, powerful and troubling argument when considering the current relationship between State funded activity and the governance of UK HE. As a recipient of multiple grants from bodies such as the Higher Education Academy (now AdvanceHE) and the Quality Assurance Agency (now a co-regulatory body in a landscape dominated by the Office for Students), I have observed a similar pattern of activity. What this means is that after a period of state funding (ie taxpayers’ money), these agencies are forced through a change in funding models to assess the value of their pre-existing assets. The change in funding models is normally a result of a political shift in how they are valued by the various governments that established and maintained them. The pre-existing assets are research and policy outputs and activities undertaken in good faith for the purposes of open source communication to ensure the widest possible dissemination and discussion, with an attendant build up in expertise. After valuing these assets, necessary rebranding may obscure the value of this state-funded work behind impenetrable websites in which multiple prior outputs (tangible assets) are pulled into one pdf. Simultaneously, the agencies offer intangible assets based on relationships and expertise networks back to membership subscribers through gateways – paywalls. This looks like the unregulated conversion of a value network established through the collaboration of state and higher education into a revenue generating system, restricting access to those able to pay.² If so, it represents a form of value extraction which is limited in how and where it redistributes what was once a part of the *common weal*.

Scottish HE has attempted to avoid this aspect of changes in the regulatory framework in two ways:

- Firstly, by maintaining its Quality Enhancement Framework (QEF) in a recognisable form.³ Thus: the state continues to oversee the funding of domiciled Scottish student places; the Scottish Funding Council remains an arms-length funding and policy agency which commissions the relevant quality assurance agency; Universities Scotland continues as a lobbying ‘influencer’ that mediates the worst excesses of external interventions; and the pesky Office for Students is held back at the border, whilst we all trundle away trying to second guess what role metrics will play in the quality assurance of an enhancement-led sector over the next five to ten years. Strategic

cooperation and value co-creation remain core principles. And all of this with Brexit uncertainty.

- Secondly, by refocusing the discussion around higher educational enhancement in the light of a skills agenda predicated not on unfettered economic growth, but on inclusive and sustainable economic growth.⁴

Two recent outputs from this context demonstrate the value of this approach: The Creative Disciplines Collaborative Cluster's *Toolkit for Measuring Impact* and the Intangibles Collaborative Cluster's recent publication.⁵ Both of these projects were valued for the opportunity they provided of collaborative problem solving across Scottish HEIs. Their outputs recognise it is now more important than ever to demonstrate the impact of what we do. Technological advances in rapid, annualised data generation is driving demands to assess the value of our higher education. The prospect of this demand requiring disciplinary engagement means academics leading their subjects (not just Heads of Quality, DVCs Student Experience, VPs Learning and Teaching) need to be more aware of frameworks of accountability than before. Underneath the production of these outputs has remained a belief in the value of cooperation over the values of competition.

However, none of this means that those of us trying to maintain a narrative of higher education as the widest possible state good can rest on our laurels. If we are to seize this particular moment there are some crucial tensions to problematise and, where appropriate, resolve. We need formal discussion around the following:

- What is to be *valued* through State influence in Scottish HE? How does the 'what is to be valued' question relate to the *values* and *value* of this education socially, culturally and economically?
- How are these values and value *to be valued* through the accountability framework for higher education in Scotland?
- What will the disruptions created by a new regulatory framework in England (based on a particular understanding of value and values) mean for how Scottish institutions continue to engage with the QEF, when they will probably also have to respond to a framework that would like to see itself as UK-wide?
- How can we protect years of enhancement work from asset stripping and value extraction? How can we continue with an enhancement framework with social, cultural, and economic benefits for Scotland and its wider relationship with the world, at the same time as supporting reinvestment into the enhancement of Scotland's higher education?
- There is a push to revalue 'success' as simple economic outcomes, away from inter-relational outcomes that capture intangible but nonetheless critical aspects of that education – social coherence, wellbeing, cultural confidence and vitality, collective expertise, innovation, responsible prosperity. That path of value extraction may result in more not less inequality: how can we mitigate it?
- How can all of this be done without merely retreating to the local? Bruno Latour has noted how locality is a cultural player in the current political inability to engage effectively with the planetary issue of the day: climate crisis.⁶ He notes the sense of security in the local's boundaries and a perception across Europe that we somehow abandoned the local in the push to be global. The local is important. Yet, he clarifies, climate regime change means withdrawal into the local in terms of value and values – without interaction across political boundaries at a global level – is tantamount to wilful recklessness. How we can enable higher education to secure the local and the global simultaneously is surely the big question with which we are grappling. How can Scotland's HE leaders engage to ensure the value and values we embody

through our accountability regime do not get mired in local growth agendas unable to measure the impact of that growth within a global ecology?

Sitting within a creative arts small specialist institution, these questions seem both overwhelmingly large (how can a minnow lead such a conversation, surely only a BIG university can do this?) and absolutely essential. In the creative arts our students are, in their own frames of reference, already challenging us on the questions of value, values, environmental sustainability and inequality through their artistry, designerly ethics, and architectural wisdoms. I am, however, yet to hear such a recognisable conversation occurring coherently across the various players (political, policy, institutional) in the wider sector, except in activities related to the localities of cultural policy, the creative economy, and HEI community engagement.⁷

Perhaps it is time for sector leaders, social, cultural, and economic policy-makers, and student representatives to work together to identify the parameters of these questions and how we can move forward to resolve them responsibly.

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Notes

1. Mazzucato, M (2018) *The Value of Everything: Making and Taking in the Global Economy*, Penguin, p xv
 2. Allee, V (2008) 'Value network analysis and value conversion of tangible and intangible assets', *Journal of Intellectual Capital*, 9 (1): 5-25.
 3. This 2016 description of the sector's regulatory framework of enhancement remains broadly the same: <https://wonkhe.com/blogs/analysis-devolved-yet-not-independent-tef-and-teaching-accountability-in-scotland/>
 4. See the Scottish Funding Council's latest strategic framework: <http://www.sfc.ac.uk/about-sfc/strategic-framework/strategic-framework.aspx>
 5. Enhancement Themes outputs: Creative Disciplines Collaborative Cluster: <https://www.enhancementthemes.ac.uk/current-enhancement-theme/defining-and-capturing-evidence/the-creative-disciplines>
Intangibles Collaborative Cluster: <https://www.enhancementthemes.ac.uk/current-enhancement-theme/defining-and-capturing-evidence/the-intangibles-beyond-the-metrics>
- Latour, B (2018) *Down to Earth: Politics in the New Climatic Regime* Polity Press, p 26
 - Gilmore, A and Comunian, R (2016) 'Beyond the campus: Higher education, cultural policy and the creative economy', *International Journal of Cultural Policy*, 22: 1-9