

No Such Thing As Society?

Social Conscience and the Marketisation of Scottish Universities

PhD Summary - Myshele Goldberg

Overview

Efforts to quantify what universities 'deliver' in financial terms have skewed public discourse about higher education's fundamental role as a site for learning, critical citizenship and independent thinking. A neoliberal quest for profit and 'efficiency' is taking hold across nearly all spheres of social life (Harvey 2007), and higher education is no exception. Using Scottish universities as a case study, with a particular focus on sociology, this project sheds light on the shift of values that has been reverberating through our social, political and economic structures.

Terms

Social conscience describes a sense of right and wrong for social conventions and institutions, and concern with the social consequences of personal actions. It is rooted in a person's understanding of the social world, their values and their beliefs, wherever these are located on the political spectrum.

Marketisation describes the practice of organising (or re-organising) institutions along business lines, particularly in the public sector. In addition to profit-making and efficiency, it is characterised by a focus on bureaucratic accountability, elaborate management structures, standardisation and rapid change.

Research Questions

My core concern was to investigate what is happening to the values that underpin higher education in Scotland. Stemming from this concern, I explored the following research questions:

- How can we understand social conscience and its expression by individuals?
- Through the academic life cycle, what values do academics express in their understanding and practice of their work?
- What are the structural and cultural barriers to academics' expression of these values?
- How have academics responded to these barriers?
- Are the structural and cultural conditions of higher education changing the kinds of values that can be expressed through academic work?

Methods

From May to December 2008, I conducted 35 interviews with sociologists at six Scottish universities – 18 PhD students and 17 teaching staff. I focused on their motivations for engaging in academic work and their experiences of working in universities. From their discussion of these topics I identified the values they associate with academic work, and I placed their accounts in the context of scholarship on higher education in the UK, USA and Europe, along with data on UK higher education over the past 40 years.

Key Findings

Despite roots in democratic intellectualism, Scottish higher education has become an unsustainable system, subsidised by the social conscience of academics. The shifting values of universities make it increasingly difficult for academics to express their social conscience, and they fear the system will select for academics whose values are a better 'fit' with neoliberalism.

Values Underpinning Academic & Sociological Work

Broadly speaking, participants valued the pursuit of truth, critical questioning, diversity, and challenging injustice. Many participants linked the capacity for critical questioning with the practice of democracy, and considered it a key part of teaching, research and outreach work. Most participants favoured research focusing on the public interest, reduction of inequality and protection of vulnerable groups, and all rejected research they considered detached, irrelevant or selfish. There was a deep respect for the complexity and interconnectedness of the social world, and a strong sense of civic duty: nearly all participants believed strongly in the social value of their work, and saw their academic roles as more than jobs or careers. Still, motivations like financial reward, status, autonomy and flexibility were also important, and many spoke of academic work as a privilege, especially those from working-class backgrounds.

In addition to broad-based intellectual values, participants also valued the emotional side of the academic role. Excitement, curiosity and pleasure were all strong motivations to pursue academic work, and the 'human element' of intellectual work was deeply important. Participants valued positive relationships with colleagues and students, and were often drawn into academia by influential teachers. Despite the self-directed nature of academic work, contact with colleagues allowed new scholars to learn on a relational level what it means to be a sociologist.

Barriers to the Expression of Academic Values

Elements of the academic role that reflect participants' values – and 'traditional' academic values (e.g. Scott 2003) – are being eroded by the growing dominance a neoliberal ethos. Decades of inadequate funding have created heavy workloads, time pressures, fragmentation of the academic role and high levels of competition, all of which marginalise 'unproductive' activities like scholarship, public engagement and building meaningful relationships with students. With the centralisation of power and funding, frequent restructuring and the ascendancy of assessment metrics, academics are subjected to increasing bureaucratic and administrative demands. The 'output' of academic labour has become increasingly commodified and controlled, pressuring academics to produce certain types of knowledge for certain types of audiences. Postgraduate numbers have grown rapidly to help meet universities' funding needs, and the 'PhD glut' has created a reserve army of academic labour, facilitating a flexible and insecure labour model.

These elements combine to create a 'perfect storm' for indirect and self-imposed censorship. Academics who write or say the 'wrong' things – or give limited attention to the 'right' things – may lose access to jobs. Many participants were attracted to academia as a space for social critique and intellectual freedom, but they felt that such space has been systematically constricted. In resistance, participants engaged in a range of strategies to nurture their own values, including focusing on the integrity of their work, 'juggling' conflicting demands, prioritising their time to suit their own preferences, taking refuge in the pleasures of research and/or teaching, and combining academic work with public engagement (or keeping the two separate).

Imposing Market Values on Academic Work

The structural and cultural conditions of higher education are changing the kinds of values that can easily be expressed through academic work. Critical citizenship, pursuit of the public good, pursuit of knowledge for its own sake, professional autonomy and the 'human element' of teaching are becoming marginalised by tendencies towards competition, quantification and centralisation of power, which in turn are fuelled by neoliberal and market-based values. Students are increasingly seen as consumers, research is increasingly seen as a commodity and public engagement only 'counts' if it adds to institutional revenue or prestige. The changes wrought by neoliberalism are skewing perceptions of higher education's broader social purpose, and threatening the capacity for universities to preserve Scotland's democratic intellectualism (Davie 1961).

To a certain extent, this tendency is offset by the social conscience of academics, who continue to express their values despite growing pressures to stifle them. However, while academics in Scotland are broadly committed to traditional academic and civic values (see Paterson and Bond 2005), their passion and dedication are finite resources, and continued exploitation is unsustainable.

Recommendations for Policy & Practice

Most of the difficulties faced by academics stem from a lack of funding in higher education, which in turn is a symptom of the much wider shift of wealth from the public sector to the private sector (e.g. Mooney and Law 2007). Still, in recognition of higher education's positive social and economic contributions, government should ensure that universities have enough core funding to remain true to academic and civic values without resorting to increased tuition fees. During a time of economic hardship, public spending on higher education is often portrayed as a luxury – but it is important to question whether we can afford *not* to invest in higher education, given its key role in social and economic well-being (e.g. Baty 2009).

It is also necessary to re-think the way that higher education funding is allocated. A certain level of competition can be healthy, but competitively-won grants should be a funding source that supplements basic core funding rather than replacing it. Similarly, while it is important to ensure quality in academic work, activities like the Research Assessment Exercise / Research Excellence Framework are wasteful and counterproductive. It would be naïve to argue for complete autonomy within academic departments or a blind provision of core funding, but a balance must be found between the power of central managerial structures and the power of academic workers, individually and collectively.

On a more ideological level, it is important for academics to openly challenge neoliberal values, and to insist that higher education be recognised – in actions as well as words – as a source of more than just economic growth. Part of neoliberalism's power comes from its narrative of inevitability and the belief that markets can solve all problems. However, this belief has been widely discredited (e.g. Harvey 2007, Klein 2007, Plehwe *et al.* 2006), and the marketisation of all aspects of social life is neither inevitable nor desirable. In Scotland, the Curriculum for Excellence emphasises developing citizenship for students in compulsory education, and this role should carry through into higher education. A strong counter-narrative highlighting the role of higher education in maintaining a democratic society would not only help to make the contributions of academics more visible, it would also challenge neoliberalism's hegemony. Collective pressure to hold politicians accountable can help translate rhetoric into practical action.

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More information is available on www.myshelegoldberg.com/academic.

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