Trust and Institutional Values in Higher Education (Draft)

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UCL Institute of Education  Wednesday, 13 November 2019

1 Accounting for our values

It is apparently no longer adequate for universities to describe their role as producing knowledge, through both teaching and research, for the social good. While protecting academic freedom and autonomy are still seen as necessary, it is not enough to describe university purposes in such terms. Hence the requirement that, following the corporate world and neoliberal imperatives, universities should declare their aims in mission and vision statements and also supplement these visions by displaying core institutional values. Academics are commonly asked to provide evidence of their enactment of those values.

This paper is framed around three inter-related concerns about such university values, which demand scrutiny by philosophers of education interested in the future of universities in the UK and beyond. Our first concern is about the selection of values proclaimed by HEIs. In section 2 we survey the values displayed by universities in the Russell Group and all HEIs in Scotland. Here we point to a range of values displayed, noting some similarities and variations across the sector, considering what is meant by ‘values’, apparently as guidelines for action with moral significance, as well as the assumptions that appear to have been made about how those values might be enacted. In section 3 we focus on the implications of the currently fashionable declarations of values by most UK universities for trust between management and academics. Our concern here is largely about the practice of requiring academics at some institutions to articulate and demonstrate how they enact those values in, for example, performance reviews. Here we turn to the concept of trust and its significance, acknowledging the complex relationship between risk and trust, arguing that mistrust is evident in requiring employees to provide evidence that they have enacted institutional values. Finally, in section 4 we suggest that, far from fostering ethical behaviour in universities, managerialist appropriation of values in HEIs both misunderstands such conduct, and could instead foster the dubious values at the heart of the neoliberal higher education regime and of its associated but not always explicitly declared values.
2 Displaying institutional values

Since the nineteen eighties UK universities have been required to produce mission statements and strategic plans, demonstrating not only their purposes but their ‘distinctive characteristics’ (Higher Education Funding Council for England, 1993). From the early 2000s, these statements have been displayed on universities’ websites, apparently to meet the ‘demands of a growing tertiary market and a constantly changing economic, political, historical, and cultural background’ (Cortés-Sánchez, 2018). Advising the UK Higher and Further Education sector on ‘Defining and articulating your vision, mission and values’, Jisc (2012) suggested that values define the character and ethos of an institution’s mission. A 2012 Universities UK publication, ‘Futures for Higher Education - Analysing Trends’, proposed that the ‘overall mission of universities remains broadly constant regardless of particular social or economic circumstances: to deliver high quality teaching and research, and to serve the needs of society’ (p.23). However, that UUK report also signals a need for change, to re-articulate values as the environment changes with ‘a new set of providers operating domestically, internationally, and online’ creating a ‘more challenging and market-oriented landscape’ as HEIs need ‘to keep under review what it is that gives them a distinctive edge’. 

To assess the public display of institutional values in universities we initially conducted a ‘first-pass document review’ (Bowen, 2009:32), of the websites of all 19 Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) in Scotland, all 24 Russell Group universities [RG], and the top-ranked 20 European (non-UK) universities from the Times Higher Education ‘Best universities in Europe 2019’ data. In January 2019, over half of the total 63 universities searched (39/63) displayed their values explicitly on their websites [16/24 RG universities, 12/19 Scottish HEIs, 11/20 European universities] with those 24 universities not explicitly articulating values nonetheless implying values assertions in their Mission/Vision statements or Strategic Plans. Hence we were able to confirm that the practice of displaying institutional values was prevalent across European/UK elite and Scottish HEIs. Although the European universities displayed their chosen values less explicitly than their UK counterparts, the European University Association (EUA, nd) states that: ‘The missions and work of universities in Europe and elsewhere are underpinned by a number of fundamental values’. For the purposes of this paper we updated our review, in October 2019, from the websites of all of the previously searched UK HEIs. Only nine months after our initial search, more UK universities are now stating their values on their websites. Instead of 16 of 24 RG universities
displaying their distinctive values that number has now increased to 20 of 24 and 14, rather than 12, of 19 Scottish HEIs have followed suit. It is reasonable to suggest, then, that the vogue for UK HEIs to publically declare their values shows no sign of waning.

Table 1 provides a summary of the twelve most frequently displayed institutional values. Arrived at via word frequency counts which omitted agents (e.g. staff, students, stakeholders, society) and activities (e.g. research, enquiry, teaching, learning) and which combined related words so counting those once only (e.g. excellence/excel/excellent), this table reveals some anticipated similarities and differences.

Table 1: RG and Scottish HEI most frequently displayed values

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>RG universities n=24</th>
<th>Scotland HEIs n=19</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>no values displayed</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
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<tr>
<td>values displayed</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>14</td>
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<td>%</td>
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<tr>
<td>1 excellence/excel</td>
<td>10 50</td>
<td>ambitious/ambition 6 43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 freedom/autonomy/autonomous</td>
<td>7 35</td>
<td>collaboration/partnership 6 43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 Integrity</td>
<td>6 30</td>
<td>excellence/excel/excel 6 43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 Diversity</td>
<td>5 25</td>
<td>innovative/innovation 6 43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 Impact</td>
<td>5 25</td>
<td>inclusive/inclusiveness/inclusion 4 29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6 inclusive/inclusiveness/inclusion</td>
<td>5 25</td>
<td>respect/respectful 4 29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7 ambition/ambitious</td>
<td>4 20</td>
<td>accessible/accessibility 3 21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8 collaboration/partnership</td>
<td>4 20</td>
<td>committed/commitment 3 21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9 Equality</td>
<td>4 20</td>
<td>Integrity 3 21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10 innovative/innovation</td>
<td>4 20</td>
<td>relevance/relevant 3 21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11 respect/respectful</td>
<td>3 15</td>
<td>responsibility/responsible 3 21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12 Sustainability</td>
<td>3 15</td>
<td>Professional 2 14</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As we might predict, there is variation between Scottish HEIs and RG values, reflecting the span of ancient, civic, pre-1992 chartered, and post-1992 institutions in Scotland. However excellence, in some form, is the most common value displayed by HEIs in both groups (50% of RGs, 43 % of Scottish HEIs). Yet, whereas excellence appears in the RG group 15% more frequently than their second most commonly cited value, freedom/autonomy, Scottish HEIs display three additional most commonly used values: ambition, collaboration, and innovation - with only one Scottish HEI displaying the value of independence. As Table 1 shows, all of the seven most commonly used Scottish HEI values were amongst the RG most frequently mentioned values but Scottish HEIs additionally displayed accessibility, commitment,
relevance, responsibility and professional in their values. In addition to autonomy, RG HEIs’ most commonly declared values not featuring on the Scottish list were diversity, impact, equality and sustainability. While we might speculate further on explanations for such variance, with relevance, for example, arguably more important for professionally oriented HEIs in Scotland and diversity perhaps used by RG HEIs to defend them from accusations of elitism, to pursue such speculation is not our central focus here. What is more important at this point in our discussion is that the values displayed reveal both variety and similarities with respect to value types and levels of generality and, as we shall suggest, that some displayed values are, arguably, not values at all, or they are of questionable worth.

At first glance, few might baulk at the idea that universities should emphasise the role of values in the way they conduct themselves. We recognise that those who work in universities probably need a repertoire of values to draw on in their professional conduct, in many situations and relationships with colleagues, students and the public. For example, they may be about the exercise of power and how we treat difference without othering. Our behaviour affects the flourishing of students and colleagues and, ultimately, of the institution. If we take seriously the role of values in our personal and professional conduct, it may seem hard to question many of the values displayed by universities. If values are understood as those principles or attitudes to which we attribute worth (that is, we prize them), then they become guidelines for action with moral significance. Few would doubt the value of acting with integrity, responsibility and with respect for others, for example.

But we need to pause and ask how useful the values displayed might be in practice in deciding the right thing to do. We might well ask of the values declared as their own distinctive selection by individual HEIs, as presented in Table 2 (see Appendix): ‘Why these and not those?’ and ‘What is missing?’. If a selection of the values noted above is declared as distinctive of our employing institutions, why would we not also wish and occasionally need to enact those that other institutions highlight as distinctive to them? So, too, if an academic leaves one university is she expected to take on the values of her new HEI and to abandon those of her former institution? If her own institution changes its values must she change those she applies in her own practice?

Some values, including inclusiveness, equity, integrity and respect, appear to be more obviously appropriate principles to guide our conduct than others. But some, for example ambition, excellence, and innovation, look more like dispositions or attitudes. These could
include those of our own university: passionate, professional and progressive. Others, such as collaboration and partnership, appear to describe structural arrangements or modes of operation. One could practise ambition and innovation in unprincipled and potentially harmful ways, and some situations call for cool-headedness and caution, or a decision to simply do the right thing for its own sake, rather than acting passionately or in search of impact.

While we note that many universities provide detailed explication of their avowed values, some values are also expressed at such a general level that, to be enacted in actual contexts and situations, they might need to be supplemented by others. This is not necessarily a problem, but it does recognise that ethical judgment is more complex than the application of slogans to complex moral deliberation, both ‘within’ and collectively with others. Ethical judgment can be difficult and it requires moral competence, which includes being attuned to context and to the features of situations that might prompt one to consider and apply values like inclusion, integrity and meeting the needs of others – or other values. Assessing the features of a professional dilemma requires reflection and weighing up the possibly competing interests and well being of different parties. Making professional decisions about what would be the right thing to do is complex, and sometimes we learn on further reflection that we may have made a mistake; perhaps regretting allowing one value to trump another.

How, we might speculate, has this emphasis on values in the discourse of HE come about? Writing on US university governance in 2003, Waugh warned that with the increased recruitment of staff from the private sector with business management expertise rather than academic administration experience, academic management as developed in the private sector:

- increasingly reflects values that conflict with the traditional values of university governance As a result, academic planning, budgeting, and day-to-day administration is becoming more like the management processes developed for the private sector and increasingly reflects values that conflict with the traditional values of university governance. (2003: 85)

The management literature, while sometimes seductive, has much to answer for, while also offering some critique of the management fads to which universities are vulnerable. We recognise the likely influence in universities of the management and leadership industry including, for example, Stephen Covey’s *The Seven Habits of Highly Successful People*
(1989) and of his distinction between *principles* as timeless, universal rules and *values* as more ‘subjective’ and changeable\textsuperscript{viii}. Statements of institutional values are sometimes used interchangeably with ‘principles’. For our purposes here we will treat these as two closely related terms\textsuperscript{ix}, both intended to frame an institution’s preferred values and behaviours, collective and individual. The terms ‘morality’ and ‘ethics’, which may be preferred to ‘values’, are of course often used interchangeably. While we note that ethics, or moral philosophy, can refer to both the study and justification of values as well as those particular values by which we conduct ourselves, for our purposes here we treat ethics and morality as interchangeable, and we will assume that most if not all of the stated institutional values of universities are intended to convey a degree of moral or ethical force. We question, however, whether that such moral force can be realised in the values displayed by HEIs in this study and so too we question the purpose of their display and selection.

It appears to be assumed that declared institutional values will, following the Jisc and UUK advice noted above, enhance the ethos of a university. Presumably a university’s members will adhere to these values in deciding how to conduct themselves in ways that are principled rather than merely expedient. However, ‘administrative values may also conflict with academic values’ (Waugh, 2003:91) and we concur that the ‘implications of business language, should not be dismissed lightly’ as such a discourse shift ‘reflects the change in values’ (Waugh, 2003: 92). Drawing on Waugh’s concerns and also writing of university governance in the US, Birnbaum (2004) suggested that proposals to change the management systems of universities:

\begin{quote}
are really disguised (and sometimes not so disguised) attempts to make academic institutions into something else, so that the institutions lose ‘moral legitimacy, core purposes, and values such that it is no longer recognizable and identified as the entity it was supposed to be’ (Birnbaum, 2004:12-13 citing Gumport, 2000: 85).
\end{quote}

That the vapid\textsuperscript{x} notion of excellence is the most favoured value displayed by both RG and Scottish universities echoes Readings’ (1996:22) assertion that excellence ‘is the recognition that the University is not just like a corporation: it is a corporation’ with the ‘University of Excellence ‘ serving ‘nothing other than itself, another corporation in a world of transnationally exchanged capital’ (p.43)\textsuperscript{xi}. The academy is in thrall to corporate
management approaches and managerialism has ‘seeped into every “nook and cranny” of university life’ (Deem, Hillyard, and Reed 2007: 27).

3 Managing values: trust and mistrust

Suggesting that organizational values are not such ‘unitary, fully formed and stable entities’ as some scholars maintain, management academics Bourne and Jenkins (2013: 496) observe that values take a variety of forms, as is evident in the declared values we have shown here. Noting that in ‘professionalized institutional fields’ including education, organizations’ members ‘may be influenced by conflicting institutional values’ (p.498), Bourne and Jenkins (2013:495) suggest there are four distinct but related forms of values: ‘espoused, attributed, shared and aspirational’. Citing Kabanoff et al.’s (1995:1081) argument that these ‘clearly represent the value consensus among an organization’s senior managers’, Bourne and Jenkins (2013) suggest that espoused values are those agreed on and sanctioned by senior management and presumed to represent values for the entire organization. They acknowledge (2013:499) that some espoused values may result from interaction at all levels in organizations, but they note Hewlin’s (2003) suggestion that ‘the appearance of conformity to espoused values is all but a façade’. Attributed values, by contrast, are those generally regarded ‘as representative of the organization’ (Bourne and Jenkins, 2013: 499) although, again, members of the organization will not necessarily share those values (p.500). By contrast, shared values, as Bourne and Jenkins (2013: 501) observe, are ‘an aggregation of the personal values of individual members’ although those do not, necessarily, align with members’ ‘subjective sense of the similarity between their own values and those of their organization’ (p.500). Aspirational values, Bourne and Jenkins’ fourth value form, may most closely approximate with the values displayed by our institution as, emerging from anywhere in the organization, their locus ‘is at the level of the members’ (p.512). However, because, for Bourne and Jenkins, aspirational values are ‘not necessarily endorsed by top managers’ (p.502) it seems unlikely that this value form adequately captures our, and any, university’s displayed values. While aspirational values, following Bourne and Jenkins, may fit with the shared personal values of those who promote these, they focus on ‘intention: what ought to be, rather than what is’ (p.502). In that respect aspirational values are consonant with university values intended to convey a degree of moral force serving as normative guidelines for action.
The values displayed by UK universities may well represent all four value forms. Institutional values are now ‘embedded’ in some universities’ structures and systems, including in performance reviews as we explain below, but they may not be ‘shared to the extent that members are able to anticipate other members’ actions, behaviours and expectations’ (Bourne and Jenkins, 2013 citing Maierhofer et al., 2003). They may simultaneously be ‘intended’ as they are formally espoused by ‘top managers’, although not necessarily ‘advocated by a significant part of an organization’s membership’ (Bourne and Jenkins, 2013:502-3) and herein lies the potentially conflictual nature of organizational values.

Our own university’s values are displayed as ‘shared motivations and beliefs’ and yet it is obvious that while social values might result from collective agreement they will not be, necessarily or even frequently, shared by everyone (see Hofstede, 1998). Many universities state that their displayed values have emerged from discussion and even polling amongst staff but we concur with Bourne and Jenkins (2013:504) in maintaining that a distinction can be made ‘between social values as an aggregation of personal values, located at the level of the individual, and social values derived from precedence, power and influence, located at the level of the collective organization’. Our university, apparently in common with a number of HEIs examined for this paper, does not, unsurprisingly, display its values as merely espoused and it has implemented strategies to ensure they are attributed. Our annual Performance and Development Review requires us to comment on our ‘general contribution to citizenship, including display of the University’s stated values’ thereby ensuring that we state, explicitly, how our work has deployed those values. Importantly, our website notes that our values are ‘The shared motivations and beliefs which bring our community together’ and so, we presume, these values must take forms beyond those which are espoused and attributed and yet we question if they represent an aggregation of personal values.

While we do not dismiss many of the values highlighted by universities including our own institution, we have questioned some of the values displayed and have articulated our concern that the values cited may not enable ethical behaviour in universities. However, our strongest critical target is the practice of requiring academics, whether individually in the course of performance review, or collectively in teams, to provide evidence of how their work displays their institutional values. Insisting on declarations of commitment to and evidence of the enactment of institutional values can produce empty recitations of loyalty to what effectively become slogans, from academics required to demonstrate compliance with values deployed
more as marketing tools than as guidelines for ethically defensible and considered actions. Not only does such required compliance suggest that academics cannot be trusted to reflect on their own values and their congruence, or not, with declared institutional values but it runs the risk of exacerbating a climate of distrust. We are sceptical about the displays of institutional values that reach beyond those traditionally associated with higher education, such as freedom, the search for knowledge and social justice. We note in accountability practices around these values a determination to avoid risk by declining to trust academics to work to traditional values formulated at a high level of generality and, instead, to judge performance by appraising them against a required display of institutional values which may not be relevant to situations in which they need to reflect on values in their professional practice.

Tierney’s account of trust points to a degree of risk when someone is trusted; in organisations, including universities, risk is inevitable: ‘risk plays a critical role in trust’ (2006:52).

Trust is a dynamic process in which two or more parties are involved in a series of interactions that may require a degree of risk or faith on the part of one or both parties. These processes help individuals make sense of their worlds and ultimately enable individuals and groups to work toward a common endeavour. (Tierney, 2006: 57)

Baier (1986) endorses Bok’s (1978:31) observation that ‘Whatever matters to human beings, trust is the atmosphere in which it thrives’. Hence employees’ disposition to trust management depends in part on whether they judge how the ways in which they are required to account for themselves enhance or distract from their performance. We suggest that the more detail and evidence required in appraisals and performance reviews, the less trusted academics may feel. If this reaches down to the very values they espouse, distrust is implied. A distrust of academics in an accountability culture already intent on ‘ever more perfect administrative control’ results in ‘a culture of suspicion’ (O’Neill, 2002: 46-47).

Making professional decisions requires one to weigh up what moral considerations a situation raises, to choose among them, to decide how to work with them, and so to decide what to do. That in thinking through such situations one will probably need to draw other values beyond those that distinguish one’s own university into the mix, points to the complexity of how
moral reasoning works. What if, in trying to enact the university’s values, there is a conflict between them? Is it not conceivable that one might have, say, to choose between being innovative and being professional, being ambitious and being inquisitive? Risk is a necessary part of making decisions about right or wrong and academics should be trusted to make those decisions without being burdened with recipes that profoundly misunderstand what it is to act in a manner informed by values. While we have made clear our preference for those statements of institutional values that restrict themselves to brief, general endorsements of, say, academic freedom and respect for diversity, even, perhaps especially those values, are cheapened and misunderstood when individuals are required to provide evidence of acting in compliance with them. Yet there is greater distrust likely when academics are required to provide evidence that they have, say, valued people or focused on excellence. Such demands are as likely to foster inauthenticity and alienation as they are to encourage principled behaviour.

We do, of course, acknowledge the authority of employers and their duty to ensure that the conduct of academics meets ethical standards and we are not suggesting that university management should accord complete trust in all things, with no accountability required. Codes of conduct appropriately address risk by setting limits to trust, especially for example in view of the unequal power relations between academics and students. At issue is rather how much to trust, and where the limits of trust should be drawn. When does a reluctance to trust sufficiently become mistrust, and at what point can raised levels of mistrust pervert the laudable values traditionally held by universities?

As universities are entrusted with public funds, research grants and student fees as well as the education of students, it is understandable that such trust is associated with an awareness of risk. The state and the public can reasonably expect accountability in how universities conduct themselves, and that they should demonstrate that they are trustworthy in doing so. But the heightened aversion to risk that has accompanied demands for universities to demonstrate value for money has encouraged an assumption that it is risky to trust them to conduct themselves without close scrutiny of their conduct and the implementation of ever more detailed technologies that measure success, such as the REF and the TEF. In turn, the corporate university seems increasingly unwilling to trust its academic staff to conduct themselves without accountability technologies like PDR and the close monitoring and reviewing of teaching and of research performance. We agree with Craig et al. (2014:9) that in the very audit culture designed to ‘enhance accountability and ultimately trust (both within
the university and without … ‘the paraphernalia of an audit culture (such as accounting-based performance management schemes) tend to diminish trust and alter the nature of the university institution’. Unfortunately, this is hardly surprising in an environment so evidently entrenched in the management approaches and managerialism we referred to above. Indeed, the Jisc (2012) advice to the sector on defining and articulating their vision, mission and values, suggested that, in order to make values ‘breathe’, to ensure they ‘both reflect and inform’ organisational culture, these values require to be shared across the institution. Such sharing, Jisc advised, might take the form of informal staff sessions ‘to encourage reflection on what adhering to these values may mean to them on an individual level’ and, perhaps, rewarding those making ‘a positive contribution to the life of the institution through acting in tune with a particular value’. Moreover, enacting an institution’s values, following Jisc advice, must be supported by evidence and so regular monitoring of staff and student views would be required, including during ‘regular staff appraisal processes by incorporating the values into the criteria by which you assess the performance of staff and set goals for the coming year’. Further, we are openly told to look to the private sector for values that are ‘specific, immediately recognisable…. but are also clearly reflected in the way they conduct business’. Perhaps inevitably, a web-search for ‘values alignment measurement performance review appraisals’ reveals a plethora of advice from the private sector on integrating and aligning organizational values with performance management. We are offered ‘values competencies’ frameworks, suggestions to evaluate and rate performance according to how staff are ‘living out the values’ (Ludema and Johnson, 2014:19), and we are urged to hold employees accountable for values as well as job performance (Tyler, 2011).

Yet while some approaches to institutional values show a lack of trust in academic staff other HEIs, such as the University of York, state ‘There is currently no defined set of institution-wide values or behaviours. However, colleagues should be encouraged to think about the “how” as well as the “what” of performance’xiii. While drawing on the ubiquitous ‘excellence’ in its Mission Statement: ‘The mission of the University of Cambridge is to contribute to society through the pursuit of education, learning and research at the highest international levels of excellence’; the University of Cambridge asserts just two core values: ‘freedom of thought and expression’ and ‘freedom from discrimination’.xiv These traditional values are formulated at a high level of generality, arguably implying that staff might be trusted to practise them as appropriate in their professional lives and as they encounter challenges requiring ethical decision-making.
4 Enacting values in the neoliberal university

Despite the practice of declaring institutional values that are intended to be distinctive of each university’s ethos, the higher education environment is likely, in practice, driven by ‘the techniques and values of accountancy’ which, according to Shore (2008:279), ‘have become a central organizing principle in the governance and management of human conduct’. Hence we are returned to Waugh’s (2003:92) assertion that we should not lightly dismiss the ‘implications of business language’ for it underpins the ways in which academics are now required to state allegiance to an academy dominated by the language of ‘counting, accountants, accountability’ rather than ‘the language of education or morality or scholarship or learning or community’ (Bean, 1998: 497). It is no coincidence that the very term ‘values’ has ambiguous associations with the neoliberal notion of ‘adding value’, which alludes to the commodification of higher education, understood as a saleable product as against a public good that is valued for its own sake and for its social and moral purpose.

Such neoliberal values are implicit in some universities’ declared values such as ambition and impact and there is also a wider set of neoliberal values that are in tension with some other declared values of HEIs. Neoliberalism also prizes competition, ethical individualism, monetisation of all that is valued, and marketisation. In the wider context in which universities work, neoliberal policies like lower taxes for the rich, rolling back the state, austerity in public services and cuts in welfare provision threaten institutional values like community, inclusiveness, fairness, equality and accessibility of higher education. Some values, for example collaboration, financial resilience, leadership, and innovation, are amenable to neoliberal interpretations that are likely to undermine the best traditional values of higher education. They can act as proxies for performativity drivers, more like objectives or strategies that may need to be tempered by other values to ensure that they do actually encourage the ethical conduct implied by modish declarations of core values.

Compelling declarations of commitment to corporate values can produce empty recitations of loyalty to slogans that detract from genuine reflection about values and can foster vices like boastfulness, hypocrisy, competitiveness and narcissism, as academics are encouraged to seek strategic advantages from accountability regimes. Sometimes the decisions we need to make may fly in the face of the declared values because others may be more suitable. For example one may need to make care or compassion a priority rather than any of those values we have been told are distinctive of our institution. Indeed, principled behaviour does
sometimes require us to hold universities to account and occasionally to point out that they can at times make decisions that contradict their declared values, or that those on offer are not the most relevant to ethical behaviour. A university’s medical research may benefit pharmaceutical companies who make profits from controversial medicines, or its engineers may be preparing students to work in the manufacture of armaments to be sold to repressive regimes.

Establishing whether our conduct is informed by values is unlikely to be achieved by requiring professions of loyalty to them, and their real enactment lies rather in the capillaries of dispersed daily actions that are not always evident. Genuine engagement with values and opportunities for moral advancement can come instead at times of crisis, say when universities fail to attend to their students’ mental health, when public scrutiny and even adverse publicity of moral failure prompt moral reflection and renewal. Deliberation about values that includes past moral failures such as some universities having benefited from colonialism or the slave trade suggest more authentic reflection.

Sadly, instead of helping universities and their employees to be principled and ethical in their conduct and dispositions, the widespread practice of announcing a set of values that supposedly marks each institution's distinctiveness may be little more than a form of branding, rhetoric rather than substance, a result of the encroachment of the corporate management industry into higher education. As HEIs scramble to define their distinctiveness, in order to compete more effectively, those that do so become ever more alike. Declarations of values reveal themselves to be little more than marketing tools, the product of branding exercises often facilitated by consultants. The distinctive universities are the ones that either decline to display their values, or simply adhere to a short statement of those traditionally most closely associated with the university, without demanding that their staff provide evidence that those values are practised.

References


Russell Group (nd) https://russellgroup.ac.uk/about/


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i previously JISC, Joint Information Systems Committee

ii https://www.universitiesuk.ac.uk/policy-and-analysis/reports/Documents/2012/futures-for-higher-education.pdf

iii That futures-oriented report then points to potentially distinctive features of a university which included, ‘a commitment to academic freedom for staff to explore and critique the world around them, an ethos of openness and serving the public good in its values and governance’ (p.24). Besides acknowledging the traditional values that report also explicitly emphasises the market-oriented landscape of universities, with related advice to be distinctive.

iv From https://www.universities-scotland.ac.uk/member-universities/ from the Universities Scotland site, ‘a membership organisation working for the Principals and Directors of Scotland’s 19 higher education institutions’ (https://www.universities-scotland.ac.uk/about-us/).

v From https://russellgroup.ac.uk/ and noting, from there, ‘The Russell Group represents 24 leading UK universities which are committed to maintaining the very best research, an outstanding teaching and learning experience and unrivalled links with business and the public sector’.

vi We are not suggesting that other HEIs do not display values in any location on their websites, simply that they are not obvious or easily findable.


viii Nussbaum (1994) would disagree, arguing that values are, to an extent, acontextual (p.13) and necessarily abstract thereby providing a means of ‘appealing to standards that are above and beyond our momentary whims and preferences. We are expressing a commitment not to be ruled by whim and preference’ (p.15).

ix Although our analysis of HEI values used only terms explicitly entitled ‘values’.

x The expression is Barnett’s (2004:64)
It is noteworthy that Readings (1996:32) highlighted “diversity” as another ‘watchword of the university prospectus’.

As an alternative to current performance technologies, Evans and Tourish (2016: 286) advocate regular informal communication with two-way feedback ‘informed by different values, based on trust and a diminution of power differentials within the workplace’. Such alternative approaches might, we contend, not only re-focus values but supplement current values with trust itself.

https://www.york.ac.uk/admin/hr/performance-management/setting-targets/values-behaviours/