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Reconceptualising the value of Humanities degrees

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Abstract: This working paper presents emerging findings from a large empirical study focused on understanding the value of Humanities degrees in terms of individual labour market outcomes and wider social, economic and political impact. The paper presents a case study of Oxford University's Humanities Division. A four-phased multiple-methods design was adopted, combining quantitative analysis of a large-scale dataset of alumni records and LEO data with in-depth qualitative interviews with graduates, students and employers. Emerging findings highlight an urgent need to reconceptualize the way degree value is understood, moving beyond reductive language of financial returns, taking into account the complexities of individuals' degree choice, their motivations, aspirations, values, and the way they navigate the labour market. A key part of this complexity involves understanding value as a *combination* of subject knowledge and employability skills, with graduates seeing skills as only being meaningful within an epistemological framework developed through in-depth Humanities subject knowledge.

Paper: Introduction

Debates over tuition fees, university finances, and the evaluation of teaching excellence, encapsulated in publication of Augar's Post 18 Review (Augar 2019), have led to increased scrutiny of the potential value of Humanities degrees. The dominant discourse arising from numerous recent studies using longitudinal data on UK graduates' labour market outcomes and employment destinations conceptualises degree value in terms of earnings – wage data being readily available at the individual level (Britton et al. 2017; Sullivan et al. 2018). Within this policy context degree value is frequently discussed solely in terms of value for money, educational 'returns' measured in terms of financial rewards in the labour market, with comparisons between subjects now a common feature of the HE policy debate. Such comparisons frequently highlight that Humanities graduates, on average, earn significantly less than their STEM peers or even individuals without degrees; the implication being that Humanities degrees represent low-return, low-value subjects (DfE 2018).

However, the question of whether salary, at a fixed point following graduation, is an adequate

measure of value is a critical one. Neglecting to account for valuation in terms of individuals' own motivations which drive continued enrolment into such 'low-return' degrees, risks falling into the trap of simply counting what is measured, rather than measuring what counts (Rich, 2019). Conceptualising value in financial terms only is firmly rooted in the language of Human Capital Theory and self-responsibility embedded in the neoliberal turn, but cannot adequately address the complexity involved in students' subject choices, individuals' aspirations, messy career trajectories, the development of transferable skills, and the wider social, political and economic impact that graduates can have. While research into the Humanities has frequently emphasised the importance of these subjects, there is a need to examine the complexity around the value of these degrees in the current instrumentalised HE context, and thereby challenge reductive understandings of HE value.

This working paper therefore presents emerging findings from a large scale empirical study focused on understanding the value of Humanities degrees as potentially critical contributing factors to the lives and career trajectories of graduates, and in terms of wider social, political and economic impact. More generally, we aim to provide a rigorous and empirically-driven theorisation of the concept of value within HE.

The project team consists of Dr James Robson (PI), Dr Emily Murphy (PI), Professor Simon Marginson (COI), Professor Ewart Keep (COI), Nuzha Nuseibeh (RA), and Alice Tawell (RA) in Oxford University Department of Education, working across two Research Centres – Global Centre of Higher Education and the Centre for Skills Knowledge and Organisational Performance (SKOPE).

Methodology

A case study approach has been adopted, with Oxford University Humanities Division selected as providing an extreme case (Yin, 2014) of an elite institution with strong graduate labour market outcomes across all subject areas. It is anticipated that this will enable critical insight into the wider experiences of Humanities graduates through the lens of a selective institution.

The following research questions therefore underpinned the study:

1. What are the career trajectories of Oxford's Humanities graduates?
2. What employability skills do relevant stakeholders see degrees in Humanities from Oxford providing?
3. Beyond labour market outcomes, what wider value do relevant stakeholders see in Humanities degrees?

'Relevant stakeholders' refers to Oxford Humanities graduates, current students, and employers. The

focus for this paper is undergraduate degrees.

These research questions were addressed through an overlapping four-phased multiple-methods approach:

Phase 1: Quantitative analysis: large-scale data drawn from the University's Development and Alumni Relations System (DARS) and Longitudinal Educational Outcomes (LEO) data was used to examine individuals' educational and employment transitions since graduation; our initial focus was to map the distribution – by gender and degree type – of graduates across different employment sectors and within a set of industries.

Phase 2-4: in-depth interviews with graduates, current students, and employers: semi-structured narrative-based interviews were undertaken with 80 graduates, selected based on quantitative analysis of degree type and destination. Interviews examined graduates' navigation of transition into the labour market, career trajectories, employability skills, and perceptions of the wider value of Humanities degrees. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 25 current students focused on degree choices, motivations, aspirations, expectations and perceptions of value. Employer interviews are ongoing and focused on perceptions of Oxford Humanities degrees, employability skills, and wider conceptualisations of degree value.

Emerging Findings

Data analysis is ongoing. Here, we therefore aim to present our emerging findings, highlight the complex ways in which all stakeholders engage with Humanities degrees, and emphasise the need for a multi-faceted conceptualisation of degree value. Based on current analysis, such a conceptualisation must take into account the following key findings:

- The complexity of Humanities graduates' life and career trajectories may not be adequately captured by fixed-point financial returns data. This may not take into account sectors where self-employment and slower earning returns are common.
- The top-end of the labour market is changing, with shorter job cycles, increased portfolio and gig working, and a wider range of self-employed consultancy roles. Degree value needs to be conceptualised in terms of navigating a much more complex and febrile labour market – even for those pursuing prestigious career paths.
- The way in which graduates navigate the labour market may be driven by motivations and aspirations beyond financial returns. These include job flexibility, meaningful work, public service, mental health, and passion.
- Discourses relating to degree value often devalue Humanities subject knowledge, instead emphasising the importance of transferable skills. However, our data clearly show that graduates view value as lying in the *combination* of subject knowledge and skills. Skills were

seen as only being meaningful within an epistemological framework developed through in-depth Humanities subject knowledge.

- Graduates emphasised the importance of self-formation and the development of their own personal values through their degrees and a reluctance to separate degree value from a holistic conceptualisation of the purpose of HE.

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