

*No Such Thing As Society?
Social Conscience and the Marketisation of Scottish Universities*

From its Enlightenment beginnings, Scotland's higher education system has been rooted in principles of egalitarianism, social relevance, civic responsibility, broad-based knowledge, and critical thinking. George Davie (1961) coined the term "the democratic intellect" to describe these roots, and he argued that English influence in the nineteenth century had shifted Scottish universities away from these core goals towards vocational specialism and individual self-interest. While more recent scholarship (e.g. Paterson 2003) has shown that civic involvement and other traditional academic values remain important facets of Scottish higher education, I argue that they are increasingly under threat – not by English influence, but by the growing trend for universities to be run like businesses. Over the past twenty-five years, decreasing government investment in higher education has led to a reliance on outside funding, forcing universities to conform to the logic of the market in order to survive financially.

In this context, my aim is to shed light on the *social* contributions of universities, beyond their important intellectual and economic roles. In debates about the public funding of higher education, it is often overlooked that universities are sites to develop the critical citizenship necessary for a democracy, and the creativity necessary to deal with pressing global issues. Universities are sites where students can explore their interests and develop new ones, laying the foundations to make meaningful contributions. Many significant social changes have been incubated on university campuses, nourished by the free flow of ideas and the spirit of critical inquiry. And for staff, universities can provide a base for public intellectualism and socially relevant research. These important contributions – which fall under what I call "social conscience" – are often forgotten when calculating the costs and benefits of higher education.

More than two decades after Margaret Thatcher's famous assertion, "there's no such thing as society," what is happening to the social values that underpin higher education in Scotland, a country that never voted for her? How are the values of democratic intellectualism responding to the increasing pressures of neoliberalism? For answers, I look to sociology: the discipline most invested in the idea of society, and most focused on contemporary social change. My research is based on in-depth interviews with 35 academic sociologists at six universities across Scotland, along with an online survey of sociology undergraduates and a review of relevant scholarship across disciplines, news reports, government documents, and university marketing materials.

In this dissertation, I will provide an historical overview of higher education in Scotland, and a theoretical model for understanding social conscience. Through the experiences of interview participants, I will examine sociology as a discipline, and explain why it is a useful base from which to explore the changing values of academia. I will delve into what makes academic work an attractive profession, how its core values are expressed, and how those values are threatened by increasing pressures from marketisation. Throughout, I will maintain a particular focus on social conscience. Ultimately, while social and civic values are under threat from changing management patterns, they are still central to the practice and belief systems of the actual teachers and researchers of higher education in Scotland, who believe they are values worth preserving.