CALL FOR CONTRIBUTIONS

Interdisciplinary Workshop

Futuring the University? Translating and transforming value(s) and valuation(s) of higher education

18-19 July, 2024

JLU Giessen, International Graduate Centre for the Study of Culture (GCSC)
in cooperation with Gießener Graduiertenzentrum Sozial-, Wirtschafts- und Rechtswissenschaften (GGS)

What is higher education, and what is it for?

The proud idea of *universitas* (wholeness, entirety) occasionally championed in academic discourses sees itself beset by narrower conceptions of which services universities should render. At the same time, in what has been called a 'multi-crisis era' or a 'polycrisis' (Henig and Knight, 2023; Morin and Kern, 1993), complex challenges such as climate change, humanitarian and security crises, or demographic shift demand answers on all levels from the planetary to the local. The humanities and social sciences have been said to battle a crisis of their own, being 'subject to a progressive devaluation' (Costa, 2019); yet, the study of culture is integral for understanding and navigating complex crises.

To pick just one problem: Narratives of the 'knowledge economy' have painted HE as a linchpin for economic growth. In their wake, it has increasingly become subject to attempts of quality control based on standardised, economised, and quantifiable measures; and they have driven substantial programmes of widening participation, marketising the HE landscape and foregrounding ideas of education as a personal investment. But knowledge economy narratives have weakened in the face of graduate under-employment and 'overcrowded' graduate labour markets in many countries, with growing numbers of graduates questioning the 'value' of their education, especially in HE systems where significant amounts of student debt are accrued (cf. e. g. Green and Henseke, 2021; Hall, 2021; Cook *et al.*, 2019).

In Germany, where this workshop is going to be held, this problem crystallises: the country stands at the forefront of a structural development that is likely to radically change, though by no means invalidate, the problem of purpose and value of HE. An accelerating demographic shift is prognosed to leave employers scrabbling to fill vacancies despite planned political easing on immigration laws (Bonin and Rinne, 2022). In this view, the discussion on what higher education educates *for* is unlikely to be resolved despite increased employment prospects for individual graduates. How can HE position itself vis-a-vis a labour market where skilled and semi-skilled workers are in urgent demand? How is the idea of *universitas* impacted by stinging skills shortages in vital sectors such as care?

Moreover, where universities do follow a knowledge economy logic and make efforts of practice-oriented education, developments in work and technology will likely continue to outpace curriculum reform. The potential of AI tools to impact knowledge jobs is currently the subject of a heated and critical debate among professionals across sectors (Kulp, 2023; Burton and Confino, 2023; Patnaik, 2023). Not least, such tools will also profoundly impact (higher) education and teaching (Bessette, 2023; Grobe, 2023; Cotton *et al.*, 2023; Perkins,

2023). With AI solutions advancing more confidently into the territory of text production and knowledge synthesis, especially in the arts, humanities, and social sciences the old question of the purpose and value of higher education is perhaps more pressing than ever.

The workshop is situated at the International Graduate Centre for the Study of Culture, where these disciplines, often agglomerated as AHSS, are conceptualised together in a radically multi-disciplinary way as *the Study of Culture*. We hope to address questions beyond our disciplines and explicitly invite researchers and practitioners who are not limited to discipline-specific contexts. In establishing a dialogue between different forms and cultures of knowledge, we aim to harness the transformative power of translation to enunciate their 'contact zones' (Bachmann-Medick, 2012) that include tensions as well as affordances.

The event is intended as a workshop in the true sense of the word – a working meeting where ideally, sparks fly as ideas are hammered out. In the spirit of counteracting crisis fatigue and learned helplessness, we hope to create a space for collective reflection and discussion that can lead to collaborative, perhaps even institutional, engagement (Brom, 2020).

We invite interdisciplinary contributions and discussants to engage with one (or several) of the following questions, or expand our exchange beyond:

- What could the future of higher education look like? Should, and how could, its roles and mandates change?
- How can the value and valuation of higher education be conceptualised in a 'polycrisis' age? What can higher education contribute to the (demographic, technological, economic, political, security) challenges of the present and the future? On the basis of which values can it position itself as an active agent there? How can it be equipped to contribute successfully?
- Is the ongoing valorisation of HE through economised outcomes (knowledge, graduate outcomes, impact etc.) and quantifiable measures sustainable? What alternative models of HE value can we put forward as its critics? What case can be made for such alternative models against stakeholder concerns like student debt and labour market policy?
- How can the conflicting values and needs of different stakeholders in higher education (e. g. students, graduates, researchers, university governance, employers, policy-makers, society) be synthesised and synergised?
- How can researchers position themselves towards this problem? How can the 'researcher' position be combined with that of public intellectual, activist, artist, individual?

Both nascent ideas, working papers and more developed projects are welcome. Contributions can take, but are not limited to, the following interactive, discussion-fostering forms:

- **Provocation papers:** these short papers explore controversial or novel ideas or arguments that have the potential to spark debate and discussion. The format encourages nascent ideas and does not require a rigorous empirical or theoretical grounding (max. 2000 words excluding references)
- **Pre-circulated papers**: these papers will be pre-circulated prior to the workshop and not presented during the session. Instead, the author will enter into conversation with

a pre-assigned discussant and the plenum (max. 5000 words excluding references, suggestions for discussants welcome)

- **Constructing 'contact zones':** brief ignite talk session (5 minutes, 20 slides) that introduces the interdisciplinary use of a relevant concept and creates bridges between fields
- **Unconference session:** the "unconference" format allows participants to set the agenda. Here, you can suggest topics and formats for a session of between 15 and 45 minutes that you will moderate or lead.

Please submit your abstract (max. 500 words) to lena.nuechter@gcsc.uni-giessen.de by 15 February 2024.

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