Beyond the metrics: the importance of intangible assets in the HE context

As a statement of fact, the Higher Education (HE) sector gathers data. Commonly these data are metrical in format, used in some way to report on some aspect of performativity, whether within the institution or beyond its bounds. This paper does not seek to dispute the need for measurement, but it does argue the limitations of metric-based proxies alone if we are to truly understand the space of the university and how it operates in the interests of students, staff, employers, government and all other stakeholders. Our interest in the limitation of metrics in the HE context inspired a study funded by QAA (Scotland). The study focused on capturing, evidencing and affirming intangible elements of HE that are not easily counted or quantified, but form key aspects of an institution's identity, culture and ethos, described by us as intangible assets.

This brief paper provides an overview of our study and its outcomes to date. In presenting our progress and conceptual framework, we are inviting reflection, constructive comment and further dialogue in respect of the model itself, and its helpfulness in re-prioritising qualitative data in our assessment of our assets in higher education.

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Introduction

Amongst others, Barkas, Scott, Poppitt and Smith (2017) recognise the significance of the current policy context in terms of how we understand the university and what we believe its outputs should be. They speak to the impact of marketisation, employability and internationalisation as factors in the mix which have done much to persuade us that we need to measure the efficiency of the university and its impact on wider society. The Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) is one such example of a metrics-based initiative, introduced to determine and then increase 'excellence' in teaching. This paper does not intend to question or critique TEF, and similar market-driven initiatives, but does recognise that the culture of measurement can, in the words of Sutton (2017) be seen by many at best as demoralising, and at worst, as wreaking 'terror' on the academic soul p.625). Indeed, Sutton goes on to

suggest that it is not just academic colleagues who are negatively impacted by the counting process. Students risk being objectified and the university itself can be viewed as more factory-like, than as a place of learning and development. In this context, Biesta 2010 (p.13; cited by Sutton, 2017 p.626) states:

> 'The rise of a culture of performativity in education – a culture in which means become ends in themselves so that targets and indicators of quality become mistaken for quality itself – has been one of the main drivers of an approach to measurement in which normative validity is being replaced by technical validity'.

Played out in this way, with measures being turned into targets and indicators, and conflated with non-measurable elements of organisations or practices (e.g. quality or excellence), we are reminded of Goodhart's Law, developed to warn the Bank of England about the unreliability of 'regulated' assets as indicators of economic trends due to the distortions that can result from both focus of attention placed on an asset, and resultant activity to improve performance (see Watson, 2000 p.10). Sutton (2017) similarly indicates the consequence of a performative and regulated culture; namely that universities can come to value only 'quantitative indicators of economic effectiveness and efficiency'. The trap of this orientation is considered by Smart, Robertson and Cleaver (2019) drawing on the McNamara fallacy to illustrate the potential to be blinded-sided to the totality of a given picture because metrics are capable of ready capture and might be valued above other indicators. Robertson (2018) additionally picks up the challenge of 'numbers, measurement, performance indicators, benchmarking' inviting us to contemplate the virtue of the sticky university[1], one wherein there is at least consideration given to things which matter but which cannot easily be captured in a number, or a proxy measure. He suggests a world in which we would challenge the constant process of accounting for the worth of our practices and the drive to report on numeric data, to ask what might be missing from the picture. And so, this study was inspired.

Data Gathering; the Emergence of a Top Five of Intangibles

Having secured ethical permission for the study, we facilitated nine workshops in England and Scotland, engaging 147 individuals in the process of talking with each other and us about their views on what matters to them that cannot easily be measured (intangibles assets), why each intangible matters and is valuable, how it is currently 'measured', whether or not a proxy measurement is used and how each intangible might be better recognised in their institution. Our workshop participants represented a cross-section of stakeholders including academic and professional services staff, senior managers and student representatives. Further detail in respect of the design and method is available in the QAA final report, "Beyond the metrics: Identifying, evidencing and enhancing the less tangible assets of higher education". From this process of talking with participants in our study, adopting a thematic analysis, a top five list of intangibles which matter most to our participants emerged. These were:

- Sense of belonging/academic community belonging
- Relationships between staff members and staff and students
- The transformative impact of higher education on students
- The wellbeing of staff and students
- Student engagement and participation

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[1] Refers to an environment that students will want to come to and to stay – Robertson, 2016

From Data to a Conceptual Model

Given the high profile of topics such as belonging, engagement, participation and wellbeing across the HE sector, while we were not unduly surprised by the top five intangibles identified by our study, we were energised by the concern of our participants that these aspects of their work should be more visible and increasingly valued by their own institutions and the sector more broadly. Understanding this drew us towards cultural mapping methodologies, and the potential of this approach to facilitate the mapping of the meaningful parts and aspects of HE that are commonly out of frame in the dominant performative discourse. Longley and Duxbury (2016 p.1) offer insight into cultural mapping, explaining it as a 'practical, developmental tool' which can be used to collect, record, analyse and synthesise information in order to 'describe the cultural resources, networks, links and patterns of usage of a given community or group' (Stewart, 2007 in Longley and Duxbury, 2016). From Longley and Duxbury's perspective (2016) cultural mapping can bring to light 'intangible dimensions of culture'. They explain:

> 'Methodologically, if one accepts that the intangible, the subjective and the immaterial are important to what culture is as an object of study, then quantitative methods *alone* are inadequate' (p.1. *our emphasis*).

The opportunity to develop a tool which might assist in making intangible assets in the HE context visible through a mapping process provided the impetus for the construction of our conceptual model which we have termed the Evidencing Value Framework (see Figure 1, below).
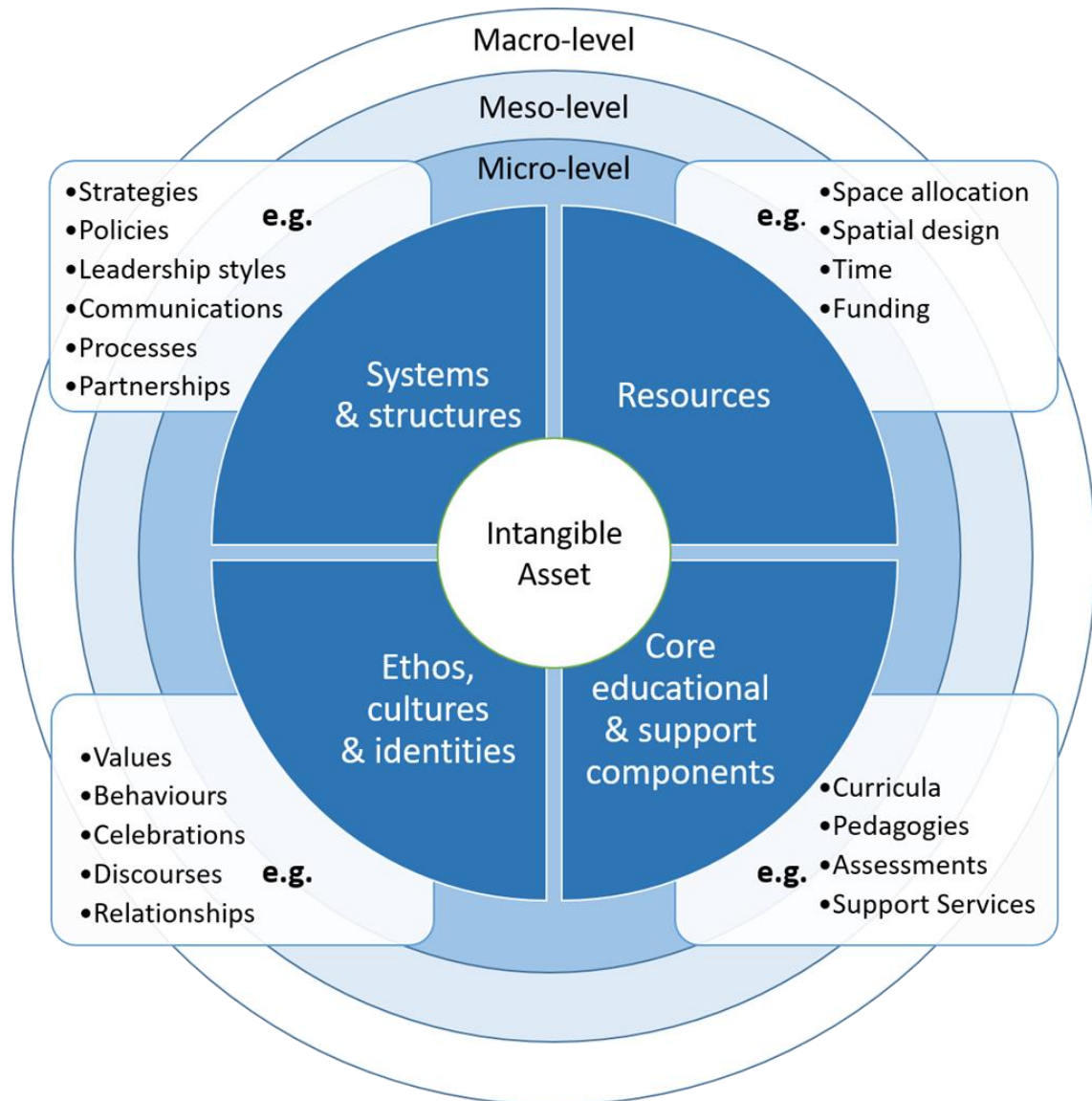
Figure 1. The Evidencing Value Framework (Robertson, Cleaver and Smart, 2019).

Offering three levels of entry – micro, meso and macro – which enable the exploration of the intangible asset from differing, possible competing perspectives, the Framework is designed to be used to instigate discussion and a process of identifying how key intangibles assets are mapped across four institutional domains: systems and structures; resources; core educational and support components and ethos, cultures and identities). For example, the model could be used by programme teams at the micro level, by departmental or subject clusters at the meso level and by senior leaders at the macro level.

Having four areas to reflect on the intangible asset provides the opportunity to look at the value that is placed on an intangible asset through the investment placed in it in relevant institutional domains. It can also help teams at all levels of an organisation to identify any gaps and/or overinvestments. For example, in mapping student engagement, the team might reveal an over-concern with attendance monitoring (systems and structures) with minimal attention to curriculum design (core educational and support components). Further, knowing how the asset maps across the institution, and where focus and investment is in evidence,

allows for targeted evaluation of these activities to see if they are making the difference, we think we are, and what could be improved.

What next?

We are now engaged in a process of using the Evidencing Value Framework to map intangible assets in different settings for a range of purposes and are reviewing its usefulness. For now, we draw attention to three aspects of the model which are worth considering.

First, the model is not benign. No cultural mapping tool ever is (Feitas, 2016 p.9). Put differently, it cannot be neutral because it is strongly influenced by the objectives of the user. Second, again drawing on Freitas (2016), while cultural mapping can be top down (macro) or bottom up (micro), it is possible to imagine that power within the institution may enable an intangible asset to be made more or less visible, to be seen as more or less of important depending on who is doing the mapping, and their particular agendas. Finally, Jeannotte (2016) guides thinking in noting that cultural mapping should always look to engage as widely as possible to ensure that the process of making the intangible visible is as complete as it might be. Therefore, engaging a wide range of stakeholders (including students) in the process would seem not only important, but essential.

We recognise that the conceptual model we have created – a model which grew out of our curiosity about what matters and form the heartbeat of the education we offer, but which elude ready measurement - may be challenging to use. As Jeannotte (2016, p.41) states:

> 'In mapping intangible culture, it is necessary to recognise that community narratives are outgrowths of contexts that are messy, non-linear, contested and ongoing. In other words, they are part of a cultural ecosystem that is every bit as complex as the natural ecosystem in which it is embedded'.

The model is therefore not offered up as a panacea, but it is a possible tool to support teams in creating stories of value beyond the metrics. These will go beyond the oft-used approach of creating narratives using student feedback quotations or anecdotes, to create a rich evidence-based story, gathered through a cultural mapping approach and associated, targeted evaluations of activity and practice, which reflects the complexity and richness of the higher education we offer to our students.

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