

The rationales for public and philanthropic support for cultural activity have in the past three decades migrated from arguments about the intrinsic importance of access to cultural experiences and of supporting a canon of work that the market would not to generate (traditional public good arguments) to arguments about the instrumental impact of investment in cultural activity on such areas as economic and urban development, the building of social capital and accelerated learning skills. As the balance of argument has shifted, in part to catch the winds of available funding, the mandates and missions of cultural organisations have themselves expanded - in some cases to the point of implausibility. There is a risk that sophistry has replaced sophistication and that the cultural community will stand accused of both hyperbole and cynicism when unable to demonstrate in retrospect the benefits that it asserts in the context of funding pitches. The 're-grounding' or recalibrating of cultural policy and the rationale for public support is a delicate matter, requiring honesty and commonsense about the nature and scale of ambitions for culture.

The talk will also suggest that in our preoccupations with the epiphenomena of cultural activity, we have failed to focus on the appropriate goal of cultural policy - establishing the conditions for a vibrant cultural community.