

Higher Education and the Public Good: Preliminary Reflections

Mala Singh

Centre for Higher Education Research and Information

Open University, UK

m.singh@open.ac.uk

Introduction

- Notion of the public good (PG) often invoked in higher education(HE) debates–consensus as abstract policy but epistemic and policy dissonance around its concrete meanings and associated strategies.
- My focus: What is the relationship between the PG and key organising concepts like knowledge society , accountability and innovation? What is the role/status of the PG within the network of dominant explanatory concepts in HE?
- What additional or enlarged dimensions does the notion of the PG bring to our understandings of HE and social change?

Areas of Focus

- Making sense of the public good in higher education
- Making policy for the public good
- Interpreting the public good in the functions of higher education
- Evaluating the public good
- Researching the public good

The Public Good as symbolic policy

- Many higher education policy frameworks invoke the PG as a policy norm or value whereas ‘knowledge society’ or ‘innovation’ is postulated as a policy goal-is this the reason for the fuzziness around the notion of the PG?
- At the level of symbolic policy, the PG in HE is well supplied e.g. Bologna Process (Prague Communiqué, 2001)-higher education is a PG and a public responsibility.
- World Conference on Higher Education (Communiqué 2009)- HE as a PG. Responsibility of the state/public authorities to support HE, providing funds from the public purse and enabling policy frameworks.

The Public Good as symbolic policy

- WCHE-higher education also a contributor to the PG
- ‘Faced with the complexity of current and future global challenges, higher education has the social responsibility to advance our understanding of multifaceted issues, which involve social, economic, scientific and cultural dimensions and our ability to respond to them.’ (WCHE Communiqué, 2009)
- Family resemblances in policy terminologies like public goods, the public good, in the public interest, for the common good, the public mission of HE, a social contract between HE and society, social responsiveness, social accountability-but meanings/levels of prioritisation may differ in different contextual settings

Making sense of the Public Good

- Is the PG a useful notion to include in research agendas which are seeking to deepen understandings of higher education and social change?
- The HELF project identified the issue of public and private goods as in need of further research, especially in a knowledge society era where the 'publicness' of HE and the role of public authorities is under challenge. (www.esf.org 2008)
- Need to give more substance to this research intent not as add-on but as integral part of study of HE and social change.

Making sense of the Public Good

- What is the most strategic way of taking forward the PG agenda in HE?
- PG discourse could be viewed as an alternative normative narrative to an economically over-determined knowledge society/innovation discourse and emphasis on private benefits of HE-use of PG could signal a preference for an ideological standpoint contra neo-liberal imperatives in higher education
- Or would PG be more potent if deployed within the dominant discursive frame of reference and used to problematise it e.g. raising questions about who produces/has access to/uses knowledge; who benefits from innovation, etc. PG could be viewed as an internal but under-addressed discourse.

Making sense of the Public Good

- Usefulness of PG to an understanding of HE and social change rests on going beyond the abstraction of the normative and the ‘tyranny of the ought’ (Calhoun, 2006). Research questions about the PG could include exploration of its contextual meanings; its links/affinities/differences iro existing policy goals (e.g. innovation and widening participation,); and its full range of concrete possibilities as a policy goal
- Distinction and connections between HE *as* a PG and HE as contributing to the PG.

Making sense of the Public Good

- HE as a PG-higher education is responsibility of the state for major financing but also for other goods undersupplied by markets/private interests e.g. national frameworks for qualifications, and for quality assurance, ensuring equality of opportunity, etc (Bergan 2009)
- HE as contributor to PG-responsibility of HEIs to connect their core functions to broader objectives of social and economic development; public missions of higher education.
- Linking the two puts the spotlight on the role of the state in orienting HEIs to deliver on their public missions through steering/regulation, incentives and monitoring-to what extent will HEIs respond to PG issues in a context of state withdrawal, increasing levels of self-steering and autonomy, and power of financial and reputational markets?

Making sense of the Public Good

- HE as an impure PG with public and private benefits(Dill 2005)
- Hybrid realities in HE and society-need to think beyond simplistic dichotomies of state/market, public/private, individual/societal
- PG as not pre-determined or fixed-PG as contested, contextually shaped and discursively produced(Calhoun 1998)
- Public goods-local and national reference points but also regional and global dimensions (Stiglitz 1999)

Making Policy for the Public Good

- Many White Papers and other policy frameworks can be found for HE and knowledge society/innovation, HE and economic responsiveness-these set out concrete objectives, strategies, incentives, timeframes, key partners, and resourcing, reporting and monitoring arrangements.
- Would similar policy treatment advance PG goals of social cohesion, critical citizenship, community development, other non-economic public benefits of HE?
- What policy, governance and funding levers can advance PG most effectively?

Interpreting the Public Good in Higher Education Functions

Teaching

- How to connect teaching and the PG? Dill (2005)-public interest best served by HE system that maximises efficiently and equitably knowledge, skills and values learned by graduates.
- Optimising graduate outputs will provide economic and non-economic benefits, individual and social benefits.
- This takes debate beyond states/markets, public and private HEIs, individual and societal. Role of public policy is to encourage all HEIs to self-regulate for efficient student learning.
- Implications of PG for curriculum, pedagogy, graduate competencies, conceptions of quality, etc.

Interpreting the Public Good in Higher Education Functions

Research

- Will PG lens give the research function different/enriched frames of reference? One of Calhoun's (2006) questions about what makes a university public is about how knowledge is produced, circulated and used? Who has access to knowledge and for what purposes?
- Problems-specifying knowledge beneficiaries and nature and extent of benefits; incentivising researchers to do PG research which does not advance positional advantage in reputational battles
- Tensions between expanding knowledge 'commons' and protecting intellectual property rights (HELF 2008)-challenge for Knowledge Society goal to enlarge social inclusion .

Interpreting the Public Good in Higher Education Functions

Community Engagement

- The PG connection to this HE function is easily made (often wrongly as the main or sole PG dimension of HE)
- Tradition of linking academic work to civic and social responsibility - examples in US, Australia, South Africa, etc.
- CE covers range of activities from philanthropy to service learning to reconfiguring all core functions to public service mission - growing body of research materials in the form of case studies, good practice strategies, evaluation templates, etc.
- Implications of Knowledge Society discourse for CE understandings and approaches.

Evaluating the Public Good

- The place of the PG in QA systems; global/regional and national ranking systems; equality audits, etc. Various toolkits, audit templates, and other resources for evaluating social development contributions, community engagement, (e.g. Talloires Network, National Co-ordinating Centre for Public Engagement, UK).
- Impact research in relation to policy themes like widening participation (e.g. recent UCU report about participation rates in the UK -widening gap in graduate numbers between poor and rich areas)
- Alternative reward and recognition systems e.g. Times Higher award to University of Teesside (NE England)-recognition for widening participation and social inclusion , student experience and employer engagement-'putting itself firmly at the heart of its community'

Researching the Public Good

- Is the PG dimension already contained in various policy positions and research investigations, without needing to belabour the issue as a distinctive and separate set of concerns in HE? Widening participation contains access, equity and social justice considerations (including questions of gender access); exploring the impact of HE interventions in economically depressed regions contains social transformation considerations; community engagement agendas indicate the public mission/orientation of HEIs
- Need for a more systematic and coherent account of the range of themes and sub-themes that can be classified under the generic term PG-which themes have received policy attention and which not, which themes have had concrete implementation and monitoring attention and which not-influence of contextual histories and priorities.

Conclusion

- PG - a sideshow or constitutive of HE identities and purposes? How central is it to an understanding of higher education and social change?
- PG as norm is valuable but easy to ignore beyond policy assertion
- PG as strategic goal for furthering change agenda within and through higher education.
- PG as productive lens in higher education research agendas.
- Need to contextualise and concretise PG in HE.