

Higher Education as a public and common good

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A conversation

The pursuit of learning is not a race in which the competitors jockey for the best place, it is not even an argument or a symposium;
it is a conversation.

A conversation does not need a chairman, it has no predetermined course, we do not ask what it is 'for', and we do not judge its excellence by its conclusion;
it has no conclusion, but is always put by for another day.

Its integration is not superimposed but springs from the quality of the voices which speak, and its value lies in the relics it leaves behind in the minds of those who participate.

(Oakeshott, 1989)

The international context

- Massification of higher education
 - Between 2000 and 2014: 100 → 207 mln. students
 - Higher education gross enrolment ratio: 19 → 34%

HOWEVER

- Significant inequalities
 - HE GER: 8% in sub-Saharan Africa vs 75% in Europe and North America
 - Low enrolment rates persist among disadvantaged groups
- Privatisation
 - Half of the increase of HE enrolment in private institutions
 - In 2015: almost 30%. (Source: UIS database)

Structure of the presentation

1. The principle of public good as applied to (higher) education
2. Challenges to the principle of education as a public good
3. Re-establishing the *public* in higher education
4. Higher education as a common good

1.(a) The principle of public good as applied to education

Analysis of discourse:

- Growing reference in international education development discourse since the 1990s.
- UNESCO, UN human rights treaty bodies, International NGOs and Civil Society Organisations, the GPE.
- Mainly in relation to *schooling*

1.(b) The principle of public good as applied to *higher* education

- UNESCO 1998 World Conference on Higher Education
 - “**public support** for higher education and research remains essential to ensure a balanced achievement of its educational and social missions”
- 2004: a particularly important consideration if higher education is required to meet the challenge of **providing a mass quality higher education** at all levels”
- 2004: “new private providers may, if certain conditions are met, enhance the capacity to **meet unmet demand for higher education** in countries with decreasing state budgets. [...] **more research** on the issue of ‘ public good’ is called for.”
- 2009: in contrast to World Bank’s advocacy of higher education as **a private gain**.
- UNESCO 2009 World Conference on Higher Education
 - “Higher education as a public good is the **responsibility of all stakeholders**, especially governments.
 - 47. Funding: Education remains a public good, but **private financing** should be encouraged.”

1.(c) Diverse levels of interpretation

As an approach/vision	to reaffirm a humanistic/integrated vision of education in contrast to a more utilitarian approach
As a policy focus	to preserve the public interest and societal/collective development in contrast to an individualistic perspective
As a principle of governance	to reaffirm the role of the State as the guarantor/custodian/main duty-bearer of education in light of the greater involvement of non-state actors at all levels of the education endeavour

1. (d) Is education a public good?

- No consensus among scholars on the applicability of this concept to the field of education
- From a restricted interpretation of economic theory: a *private* good.

HOWEVER

- Justification for State intervention: positive externalities; besides considerations of economic efficiency, also issues of equity and social justice

No zero-sum solution: Education is both a public *and* private good
[Ver Eecke, Marginson]

How the State should intervene: economic and political perspective.

2. Challenges to the principle of education as a public good

- Privatisation and marketization
 - Massification has put greater pressures on public funding
 - Diversification of providers and funders
 - HE as an essential part of the “Knowledge Economy”, an “engine of development”.
 - GATS, WTO: a tradable service
 - Consumer orientation: commodification and unbundling (McCowan)

Implications

- Role of government in the governance of the system (not merely an economic challenge but a political one)
- Equity
 - Organization of HE
 - Purposes: greater emphasis on private/economic benefits and changing social compact between HE and society

Reduction of public-good aspects of higher education:
a private good for which individuals and households should bear the costs

3.(a) Re-establishing the *public* in HE

- Different senses of the term *public* : *public and private are fuzzy concepts*
 - Higher education *for the* public good, or HE *and the* public good (Marginson, Calhoun, Singh)
 - Acknowledging and measuring the *public, noneconomic* benefits that HE engenders (Schendel, McCowan, Oketch)
 - Higher education *as* a public good: in itself and in the light of the various outputs universities engender (knowledge, information, research, often considered as public goods themselves) (Tilak, 2009)
- How does all this translate into principles of governance?
- *Political perspective* focuses on the institutional regulation of goods

Role of the State in the governance of higher education (Bergan et al. 2009)

Type of role	Level of responsibility	Description
Regulation	<i>Exclusive</i> responsibility	Ensuring the framework of education, including the structure, the institutional framework, the framework of quality assurance and authoritative information.
Policy-making & Monitoring	<i>Main</i> responsibility	To determine objectives and priorities through mechanisms of democratic discussion. Devise and implement mechanisms for the evaluation of results obtained in the pursuit of those objectives.
Provision & Funding	<i>Important</i> responsibility	Public authorities should be heavily involved in the actual running and funding of higher education institutions and programs.

“The choice will no longer be
between the state and the market,
but between two sorts of states.

It is thus incumbent upon us
to reconceive the role of government.

If we do not, others will”

(Tony Judt, 2010)

3.(b) Re-establishing the *public* in HE

- A corollary of a larger project of state and societal transformation (Singh, 2014)
- Higher education as part of the public sphere (Biesta, Marginson, Calhoun):
 - Reaffirming the political sphere over the economic one (Zamagni)
 - Normative perspective of the public sphere denotes a particular quality of human interaction (action and relationship) that are possible in ‘public’ spaces.
- ‘Becoming public’ is about...

“the achievement of a form of human togetherness in which [...] action is possible and freedom can appear” (Biesta, 2012)
- HOWEVER, the way the public sphere should be reconstituted requires a “shift in culture”, combining top-down and bottom-up approaches.

4.

Higher education as a common good

4. Origins of the concept of *commons* and of common goods

- *Res communes*: Roman law (air, running water, the sea and its shores)
- “Common”, *com-muniis*: equal sharing of duties and responsibilities (contrary to “immune”, *in-muniis*, without duties)
- *The commons*: Ostrom (1990) resources defined in economic theory as non-excludable but rivalrous or subtractable – irrigation systems, fishing grounds
 - Beyond the State and the market, forms of shared governance and ownership
- The definition has expanded to include more generic material and immaterial goods
- This concept holds a minimum semantic core (Coccoli, 2013)
 1. Opposition to the dynamics of neoliberalism
 2. Re-composition of networks of cooperation within communities
 3. Development of instruments of participatory democracy

The particular nature of common goods

- From a philosophical-political perspective a unitary category which goes beyond the economic classification of goods

(Taylor, Deneulin and Townsend, Viola)

The goodness of life that humans hold in common



The concept of common goods at the micro level is related to the idea of *the* common good at the macro level, “understood in terms of social solidarity, social relations based on universal human rights and equality of respect” (Marginson, 2016).

Public goods *and* common goods

	Public goods	Common goods
Principles/theories	Equity and social justice	Besides equity and social justice, also solidarity and cooperation
	Political economy theory	Philosophical and political perspective
	Subjective conception of rights	Relational conception of rights
Nature	Can be enjoyed as individual goods	Necessarily shared, both regarding production and benefits
	Non-excludable and non-rivalrous characteristics presented in terms of consumption of a commodity	Non-excludable and non-rivalrous characteristics presented in terms of participation and generation of the goods themselves
	The public quality is predetermined	The common quality is dynamic and not pre-existing
Governance	Public governance justified on the basis of externalities which extend to all	Shared governance justified on the basis of the cultural and social value of a specific good
	Result of the action of public institutions	Result of the interaction of the different components of society
	Top-down approach	Bottom-up approach
	Passive role of those who benefit	Active role of those who benefit
	Formal democracy	Substantial participatory democracy
Value	Limited to the provision of facilities and services to a certain national community	Necessarily imply the empowerment of all actors who have a right to a fully informed and critical participation
	Neutral context	Acknowledgment of the diversity of contexts and of the cultural and social dimensions of a specific community
	Instrumental, can be treated as economic resources	Cannot be reduced to economic resources or to factors of production because of intrinsic social and relational value

Higher education as a common good

- Humanistic approach
- Shared endeavour and responsibility
 - Process is a common good in itself
 - Pursuit of learning as a co-operative enterprise (Oakeshott, 1989)
- Integrated approach to education (capabilities)
- Knowledge democracy

Higher Education as a common good

Implications on both the organisation and purposes of the HE system:

- Organisation: deliberative and transparent processes in order to “think jointly” (Arendt)
 - Horizontality vs verticality
 - Enhancing sustainable and ethical forms of partnership and cooperation according to different realities
- Purposes: extend human understanding through open-ended enquiry (intrinsic and societal value):
 - For the person
 - For knowledge
 - For the democratic society

The three functions of universities

- Teaching: Relational dimension of teaching. Holistic approach.
 - Based on the fundamental perspective that knowledge is structured in consciousness of oneself and of the world.
- Research: not merely immediately “useful” research
 - Long perspective
 - Diversity of worldviews and knowledge systems
 - Freedom of the researcher
- Community engagement/public service:
 - Capacity to bring together different components of society
 - Emphasis on the social responsibility of HE institutions
 - Privileged position to potentially contribute to democratic development

If you want the University to be a serious place that does not give the impression of somewhere empty, closed and outdated... let there be life there, let society with its doubts be reflected, and let the difficulties of human coexistence be understood and dealt with.

Let this small society be a bridge to life.

(Aldo Moro, 1946, Governare per l'uomo)

Thank you for your attention