



CGHE Annual Conference 22-23 May 2023

Session Details

PANEL DISCUSSION - The 'public' Character of Tertiary Education

23 May 2023, 11:45am - 12:45pm (UK)

Chair: Lili Yang

Speakers: Aline Courtois, Elisa Brewis, Krystian Szadkowski

Though neoliberal policies focus largely on the individual economic benefits of higher education for graduates, including the augmentation of earnings and rates of employment (neoliberal policy does this partly to justify tuition charges), higher education does much more than this. The larger non-pecuniary outcomes of higher education, which are economic, social, political, cultural and epistemic (knowledge-related), and both individualised and collective, are variously understood as its 'public', 'social' or 'common' benefits. These range from the effects of higher education in fostering autonomous, self-realising persons making their own lives, to the contributions of basic research to knowledge, to the fostering of tolerant and stable communities, equitable opportunities, reproduction of the professions, collective public health, the development of cities, international relations, cultural activities and more. In some countries the public or social outcomes of higher education are seen as very important and a major aspect of policy and practice. In other countries, including the Anglophone nations, they are marginalised or ignored by government unless they are associated with measurable economic benefits. There is no consensus on how to define and observe the 'public', 'social' or 'common' benefits of higher education. Not all can be measured, and still less can we devise a single system of measurement. The outcomes of higher education are complex and heterogeneous. The conceptual challenges are one reason why the non-pecuniary benefits are under-recognised, or handled in an incoherent manner, but ideological factors also play a role. Economic frameworks which judge education and society solely in terms of financial market values, and focus only on higher education where it contributes to capitalist profitability, lead to the radical neglect of non-economic factors and cannibalise the larger potentials of education.

With the Anglophone countries stuck in a rut here, there is much to be gained by looking at how other countries around the world see it. Notions of the mission and contribution of higher education are closely affected not just by autonomous university and academic life but by the political culture and relations between the state/government and higher education, which vary between countries. This panel will look at the approaches to the 'public', 'social' and 'common' roles and work of higher education in France, where the 'public' dimension is

more explicit than in UK; Finland, where there has long been a social consensus on the contribution of free higher education to social equality; and Poland where all of socialist notions of 'public', older traditions, professional academic culture and nation-building government are in play. By comparing and contrasting these different approaches we can start to tease out what might be common to all countries, and what might be specific to national and institutional settings. We might also find that certain countries have developed ideas from which others can learn.