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Higher education and public good: The case of the UK (England)

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The UK study looked at the evolution of policy by reviewing a small number of major policy reports, Robbins 1963, Dearing 1997 and Browne 2010, supplemented by Augar 2019, and conducted 24 semi-structured interviews. There were 13 in universities (six in a London-based global research institution, seven in a provincial research university not in the Russell Group), and 11 with what can be called policy professionals, including four current or former policy makers and/or regulators, four leaders of national organisations, and four academic experts on the topic. (One person was in two of these categories). It was a study of England rather than the UK. All 13 university personnel were England based, and while all of the other 11 interviewees had a UK wide remit all but one of them worked in England.

The Anglophone political culture, as in other Euro-American (Western) polities, is rooted in multiple authority, including spaces partly outside the state. Society is divided between government-as-state with coercive powers, potent within its limits; the economic market; civil society in a variable relation to the state; and the individual with an ill-defined normative primacy. The state is divided between executive, legislature and judiciary. The borders between the state and other sectors are routinely contested. The university, with its regulated autonomy and boundary tensions is another part of the division of powers.

But England is an outlier in some respects. First, government in higher education and other sectors is highly top-down, centralised on Westminster

and Whitehall, without the traditions of bottom-up sovereignty and diversity found in West European countries like Germany.

[From publicly financed private goods in 1963 to privately (student) financed public goods 2010]

Second, English higher education is the most neo-liberalised system on earth. It is quite remarkable that following the Browne report the English state was able to impose a policy and funding framework in which most students, domestic and international, not only pay the full costs of their own education, *they pay for most of the public goods created by higher education as well*. The state confines its main financing to part of the cost of research, and subsidisation of the unpaid student loans, that is, access to higher education as a private good. The Office for Students regulates competition and consumer protection in parallel to the state regulation of privatised utilities like power, water and transport. This is far from how higher education is seen in other countries, and, as we found in the study, far from how most practitioners in England see it.

Let me briefly recall for you what the interviewees told us.

['Transcends individual utility']

First, definitions of public good and public goods There was no single understanding of these terms, and a lack of clarity about concepts that have, after all, been explicitly excluded from policy. However, the majority of interviewees developed an expansive description of the domain of public collective action and inclusive social relationships, often in general terms, sometimes linked to grass roots local democracy of the common good kind. When it came to higher education, a typical response was the middle level academic manager who said that higher education was committed 'to serving society [and] making the world a better place'.

[Individuals gain more than pecuniary benefits]

What did this mean in practice? Here interviewees often fell back on government performance regimes, such as the Research Excellence framework which referred to impact, the Knowledge Exchange Framework, and the Teaching Excellence Framework. There was also criticism of these regimes, especially the TEF metrics. Several argued forcefully that this narrowed the education mission, excluding the long-term formative effects of higher education and knowledge in fostering student agency and social capabilities, which then contributed to the public good.

[No single conceptual framework for measuring public goods]

At the same time, the power of metrics was apparent. A problem with public goods in higher education, for both scholars and policy, is that they are multiple, heterogeneous, and some are difficult to observe and impossible to calculate. Within the long lists of public good outcomes, some stood out across the study. As in other countries in the project, public goods often mentioned were the reproduction of occupations and professions, an educated citizenry, the many contributions of research, and higher education's role in facilitating social opportunity and mobility. The last was strongly felt by interviewees.

[But 'it is creating social division']

But several interviewees had doubts about the effectiveness of higher education in enabling social mobility, and there were articulate concerns that the sector was creating barriers that reinforced social stratification, a public bad, between those with higher education and those without. In a system in which the wider public benefits of higher education were not recognised, the broader community seemed to gain nothing from the sector.

['Public and private benefits are not necessarily antagonistic']

When it came to the Samuelson economics in higher education, those university interviewees who were economically-trained readily moved into the zero-sum public/private logic. Higher education was either public or private. But this was strongly resisted by other interviewees, including the policy professionals. Most argued that higher education generated a mix of individualised private benefits, pecuniary and non pecuniary, and collective public benefits. Public and private outcomes were simultaneous and contributed to each other. Interviewees were very clear on that point.

It was only when it came to financing that the discussion changed. The Samuelson logic provided a basis for allocating costs between public and private, one locked into the tuition structure, and interviewees were deeply aware of the premise that the user was the main beneficiary. It made them uncomfortable, but none of them argued, as they might have done, that part of the money used to prop up the loans system and preserve the ideology of a pure market should be redirected into direct government funding of teaching. It seemed that interviewees wanted Robbins and Dearing outcomes but with Browne financing.

It was another sign that the public good discussion in England lacks coherence. Practitioner and community ideas of higher education are way out of whack with the centralised market model. But England lacks a shared policy language for discussing higher education outcomes other than individualised economic benefits; and government recognition and funding of public goods in the sector will not return to the agenda until a new language gains traction.