Assessing the contributions of higher education

CGHE Webinar (1 of 4): 14 March 2023

Seeing higher education as a state, seeing higher education and society

Simon Marginson, University of Oxford

**[opening slide University of Bologna]**

The contributions of higher education, institutionalised higher education in cities and states, with functions in teaching, learning, scholarship and often also investigation, have a long history. Dating at least from the state academies that prepared officials in the Zhou dynasty and after in China; the Buddhist monasteries in Northern India that drew scholars from all over East, West and Central Asia; the Academy in Athens and the library and science of Alexandria; the scholarly and educational mosques in the Muslim world; and the medieval European universities that grew in the zone between church and state. The first was Bologna, founded in 1088 CE, but it is not the oldest higher education institution with a continuous existence. While some Chinese institutions claim ancient origins, we are certain about Fez in Morocco, founded in 859 CE.

**[Assessing the contributions of higher education** ***Webinar 1 of 4: 14 March 2023***

**Seeing higher education as a state, seeing higher education and society]**

Higher and tertiary education institutions have now become more central to their societies than ever before, with multiple social, economic, political, cultural and intellectual functions. They prepare and certify more than half the population of many countries for life, work, professions and occupations; provide and opportunity structure that funnels people from unequal social origins to unequal destinations; perform funded research and shape global science; underpin cities and regions; foster public health, social inclusion and tolerance, political connectedness, international relations and much more.

But this great range of activity is often not well understood, or effectively monitored, by public media and by the policy makers who sustain the legal and financial structure of institutions. There are no commonly agreed definitions and measures of the contributions of higher education. The discussion is plagued by simplifications of a complex emergent reality. Policy makers in some countries, including my own, work with a narrow and reified notion of higher education as individual earnings benefits plus basic research. The all-too familiar business model of higher education obscures much of the real work of the sector in student learning and development, and knowledge, and under-estimates most of the impacts in the economy, society, polity and culture.

**[Assessing the contributions of higher education: *the book]***

In the new open access book published by Edward Elgar, and edited by Brendan Cantwell, Daria Platonova, Anna Smolentseva and myself, Assessing the contributions of higher education, we hope to broaden and deepen the discussion of the worldwide work of higher education by examining the different facets of the sector and its social connections, and tackling the conceptual and empirical challenges in devising an approach that is at the same time more rigorous, more complex and more comprehensive.

**[Assessing the contributions of higher education: *chapters 1-7]***

The 14 chapters in the book cover many but not all of the local, national, regional and global contributions of the sector. Chapters 1 and 2 introduce the book and our overall thinking about the contributions problem, which I will discuss briefly in a moment. Chapter 3, which will be introduced by Anna Smolentseva in this webinar, offers a new conceptualisation of the non-economic contributions of higher education, looking at both what higher education does, and the internal dynamics of higher education, whether what it does involves transmission, transformation or creation. Chapter 4 argues that higher education can be understood as the reflexive self-formation of students and explores whereas theorisations that help us to understand student agency. Then the book moves to global aspects. Chapter 5 looks at higher education’s contributions, positive and negative, in relation to the biggest issue of all: the global climate crisis. Chapter 6 looks at open national and regional higher education systems amid increasingly tense geo-politics. Chapter 7 compares two different political cultures in their understanding of higher education’s contribution to the public good: China, and Anglo-America.

**[Assessing the contributions of higher education: *chapters 8-14]***

Chapter 8 completes the global section of the book by examining the remarkable level of research cooperation between China and the US, which is now threatened by the geo-political standoff between them. In the remaining chapters we explore higher education’s contribution through the lenses of economy, polity, government and culture: graduate employment in chapter 9; higher education and democracy in chapter 10; government reforms to higher education in chapter 11, which will be discussed by Brendan Cantwell and Daria Platonova in this webinar; contributions to policy making and government regulation in chapter 12, contributions to culture in the lucky 13th chapter, and contributions to the formation of regional elites in chapter 14.

[**Two kinds of purpose of higher education]**

I will now develop some ideas which might help to illuminate the contributions of higher education. In chapter 2 we distinguish between the intrinsic and extrinsic purposes of higher education. The intrinsic purposes are the education and certification of students, and activities related to knowledge, its dissemination and creation. These are the core of the sector and its unique social role and shape its internal organisation, and in themselves they can be carried out within higher education alone. In contrast there are the extrinsic purposes, where higher education can only deliver when working with social partners, such as preparation of students for work and occupations; the socialisation of students as citizens; the contribution to building cities and regions, and cross-border relations; the many faculty inputs into government. You can see that while the extrinsic activities need social partners, they also rest on the core capacity of higher education in education and knowledge.

[**Biesta’s (2009) three functions of education]**

That’s the two kinds of purpose, intrinsic and extrinsic. Now let me introduce Gert Biesta’s three functions of education: qualification, socialisation and subjectification. Qualification is preparing students to do something, often in the economy, such as the knowledge, skills and understanding needed at work. Socialisation is about the transmission of values, often when students acquire knowledge, that shape them in the norms of social, cultural and political ‘orders. Subjectification is about education’s helping students to become self-realising individual subjects, independent in their thinking and acting. This is a stronger notion of agency than the passive notion of student as consumer.

**[The two purposes and three functions together]**

Let’s put these two distinctions together: the intrinsic/extrinsic, and qualification, socialisation and subjectification. This helps us summarise what higher education is and does. You can see that qualification mainly falls in the extrinsic sphere because it mostly needs social partners, such as employers and professions. Socialisation, which is about norms and knowledge, is shaped in both the intrinsic and extrinsic spheres. Whereas subjectification, higher education’s role in providing conditions whereby students develop as independent reflexive people, through knowledge and experience, happens mostly within higher education itself, inside and outside the classroom. Employers value graduate autonomy up to a point, but only up to a point - that is other-regulated autonomy, not free self-regulated personal development.

**[The two purposes and three functions together 2]**

In the public and policy discussions of purposes, functions and value in higher education, the emphasis has become overwhelmingly concentrated on qualification, understood as an extrinsic purpose of higher education. This is where governments and other external stakeholders are at their strongest and exert the most influence. The other functions currently tend to be neglected. The intrinsic purposes, where higher education commands itself, has a unique role as a social sector, and does the core of its work, are rarely acknowledged.

**[The two purposes and three functions together 3]**

In particular, the intrinsic role of higher education in personal development as self-forming subjects, in helping students to emerge as strong self realising agents, is scarcely discussed. It is almost as if it does not exist. Yet is absolutely central to the lifelong benefits that students gain from higher education.

**[Mapping the contributions in time and space]**

As this shows, there is much more to the individual benefits of higher education than graduate employability and earnings. There are also the many collective benefits of higher education. And both the individual and collective benefits play out in the global scale as well as the nation. Assessing the contributions of higher education takes the reader to all four parts of the quadrant here. I’ll now hand over to to tell us more.