

Domain: Higher Education Policy**Title:** Problematizing the Public Good in Higher Education Policy**Key words:** public good; marketisation; policy; individualism; private good**Abstract:**

As the UK HE sector becomes increasingly marketised there is renewed interest from both academics and policy makers in defining the purpose of HE in relation to the public good. But the concept of public good in HE policy from Robbins (1963) onwards has been continually reconstructed according to changing social, economic and political conditions. The notion of HE as a public good has never been unproblematic. When the public good was defined primarily in relation to national economic productivity, an external, instrumental aim was placed upon relatively autonomous universities. The production and transmission of knowledge became publicly funded, literally valued, only insofar as it was perceived to benefit society. As the public good of HE is redefined in relation to social justice as a more individualised notion of social mobility, it reinforces, rather than challenges, current discourses of education as a private investment.

Economists such as Paul Samuelson (1954) have variously defined public goods as having non-excludable and non-rivalrous outcomes; being state funded; and generating externalities in the form of social and public benefits (in Tilak: 2008). Since 1954 definitions of the public good have altered with the prevailing social, political and economic climate (Desai: 2003). Discussion as to the nature of the public good higher education (HE) provides has come to the fore in recent years (Marginson: 2011) as an increasing number of national governments move from publicly funding HE to considering it a private good conferring benefit chiefly upon individuals (Slaughter and Rhoades: 2004; Carpentier: 2010) who are expected to contribute to its costs. Some who are critical of marketisation can appear nostalgic for publicly funded HE providing public goods (see for example Nixon: 2011 and Brown: 2011). This paper offers a conceptual analysis of national policy documents and relevant academic literature. I argue that considering HE as a public good has never been unproblematic and that redefinitions of the public good in national HE policy reinforce, rather than challenge, the discourse of private benefits.

Re-defining the public good

The original defining of HE as a public good took place against a backdrop of post-war political compromise, relative economic prosperity and the creation of the Welfare State. Increased

public funding for education (Carpentier: 2010) is reflected in the Robbins Report (1963): 'higher education is so obviously and rightly of greater public concern, and so a large proportion of its finance is provided in one way or another from the public purse'. Desai (2003) characterises the state as being perceived as a 'benevolent dictator' safeguarding the economic and social well-being of all citizens and this belief was extended into HE. Robbins' aim was for universities to 'realise the aspirations of a modern community as regards both wealth and culture' in 'an era of rapid social and economic advance'.

For Robbins, the public good of HE was to be found in the economic and social benefits accrued to society, that is, non-graduates as well as graduates. Universities, as autonomous institutions, were relatively free to set their own largely liberal academic priorities that were not necessarily in-keeping with Robbins' four stated goals for the sector. However, in promoting HE as a public good, the autonomy of institutions is challenged. HE is presented as an instrumental means to achieving what Robbins and other policy makers determine to be good, rather than being considered good as an end in itself (such as described by Newman in *The Idea of a University*). The purpose of universities is then open to change with the priorities of different political regimes.

The impact of human capital theory

The economic downturn of the early 1970s saw the emergence of human capital theory (see for example Becker: 1993) and later, its influence upon education policies. Whilst the public good of HE continued to be perceived primarily in relation to national economic competitiveness this was increasingly in individualised terms of the financial returns accrued from employing graduates. By 1997, Dearing suggested that government and universities must 'encourage the student to see him/herself as an investor in receipt of a service, and to seek, as an investor, value for money and a good return from the investment'. This notion of HE as an individual investment chimed with a more atomised social and political climate (see for example Lukes: 1973; Beck: 2001). Dearing breaks with the established discourse of national economic advancement and begins a focus on private economic gains in the form of individualised human capital. The public returns to HE in terms of increased wealth and employment are seen to be gained by graduates alone, and it is only 'spillovers' that benefit others in society.

The shift to the private

Post-Dearing, and with the introduction of higher tuition fees paid by individuals, the Labour government began a discourse which explicitly presented the public good of HE in relation to social justice (see *Higher Ambitions*: 2009). This has been continued by the current coalition government. *Students at the Heart of the System* (2011) defines social justice as brought about through individual social mobility which, in turn, is defined as increased earnings potential and greater job security. Although HE has arguably always led to social mobility for some individuals, in the past this was considered a by-product of the social and cultural capital students accrued. Promoting social mobility was not the defining role of universities. The public good of HE thus becomes reconceptualised according to a more individualistic methodology as 'the mathematical sum of the private benefits,' (Marginson 2011: 413). As there are considered to be few benefits of HE for non-participants, the emphasis in terms of promoting the public good through HE is placed upon encouraging more individuals, particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds, to participate (see for example, *Widening Participation*: 2003).

This reconceptualised public good is problematic for HE. The focus upon social justice and individual social mobility moves universities away from non-excludable knowledge outcomes, 'the unique claim of higher education' (Marginson: 2011). Knowledge, most specifically in the form of culture, is no longer perceived of as a public good, either in terms of its economic role in building national prosperity or its social role in including all of society into a coherent cultural vision. Students

are no longer perceived as potential contributors to the public intellectual capital of the nation, but instead as private investors seeking a financial return in the form of enhanced employability skills.

An alternative model would be to perceive of the public good of HE as the formalised relationship through which collective, non-excludable, knowledge outcomes are passed from one generation to the next. Arendt (1954) suggests education plays a role in inculcating new generations into the knowledge of a pre-existing world for them to make anew. This would be to consider HE as a social contract between the generations based upon the broader public good its knowledge outcomes provide for the whole of society (Tilak: 2008 and Brown: 2011).

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