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Higher education, political cultures and public good: A comparative study (0164)

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### **Abstract**

What is the basis of sociability or 'public good' in advanced societies? How do higher education institutions and systems contribute to it? How can we enhance it? Whereas economics identifies private individual benefits of higher education such as augmented earnings, the public or social benefits pose a more difficult conceptual, empirical and policy problem. Notions of the public or social role also vary between the major regional traditions and political cultures (e.g. English-speaking limited liberal states, Nordic systems, Germany, Russia, China and East Asia, Latin America, etc.). The paper reports on the first year of a three-year comparative investigation of the role of higher education in producing national and global public goods. These goods include collective benefits jointly not individually consumed, such knowledge, equitable opportunity, scientific literacy and cosmopolitan social relations. The paper outlines findings from the first two of eight planned national case studies: Australia and Russia.

### **Conceptual framework**

HEIs are among the main institutions of advanced societies. They are closely involved in the society-building and nation-building agendas of states (Scott 2011). They educate people in social skills and attributes on a large scale. They reproduce occupations, they provide structured opportunity and social mobility, they create and distribute codified knowledge, and they carry a heavy and growing traffic in cross-border relations. While there is no general theory of higher education it is clear many goods produced by HEIs are not captured as benefits for individual students or companies but consumed jointly. They are collective in nature. HEIs contribute to government, innovation capacity, and the formation and reproduction of both knowledge and relational human society. The public outcomes of higher education also includes individual goods associated with the public collective benefits, e.g. the formation, in students, of the capabilities of social and scientific literacy, effective citizenship and economic competence (McMahon 2009).

The role of higher education and research in forming public goods (Samuelson 1954; Ostrom 2010) is elusive to both social science and policy makers. Collective goods are a frontier problem in social research. However, policy in many countries models higher education as a market, and higher education is often under pressure to focus primarily on individualisable economic benefits. Though it is evident higher education does not function in the manner of a capitalist market, methodological individualism, business models and market ideology block adequate recognition of the public goods, except equity in participation, the contribution of research to industry innovation, local and

regional engagement of HEIs, internationalization. What happens to sociability when the pendulum swings more towards private goods? We need to understand the collective costs entailed in this reduction.

How then can we grasp the public good comprehensively? How do we move beyond a solely economic understanding without setting aside notions of production? How do we measure public goods, while satisfying both inclusion and rigour? We need a leap forward in conceptual and methodological clarity. There is no generic nomenclature. Discussion is often normative. Evidence-based approaches are undeveloped. No one discipline is a comprehensive framework. Global public goods (Stiglitz, 1999; Marginson 2007) are under-recognized, because there is no global state (Kaul, et al. 1999).

Further, while HEIs have common elements worldwide, the meanings of 'society', 'state', 'private', and 'public goods' are not uniform but are nationally and culturally nested. They vary between the different political and educational cultures. What is generic to all societies, and what varies? Arguably, in liberal Western societies understandings of the public good(s) created by higher education have become ideologically 'frozen'. But there is no good reason to treat the Anglo-American approach to public/private as normative. Any national/cultural tradition has the potential to contribute to the common pool of ideas about collective human existence, including the public dimension of higher education, and strategies for augmenting it. This suggests it may be helpful to look beyond Western jurisdictions for fresh insights, generic elements common to all regions, and possible conceptual frameworks.

### **Implications**

It is hoped the ultimate outcome of the study will be a widely applicable framework used by researchers and governments for defining, where applicable measuring, comparing, and enhancing public good(s) in higher education. By comparing the different approaches to 'public good' in higher education that have evolved across the world, generic elements can be identified, and a common language of public good developed. This move can also make it possible to establish a broad-based notion of specifically global public goods. The expected outcomes of the research program will assist policy makers, philanthropists and HEIs to clarify public goods and think creatively about practices designed to optimize those public goods and their distribution.

### **The paper**

The paper reports on the first year of a three-year study comparing approaches to the role of HEIs in creating public goods, in eight national systems that between them embody regional variations: UK, USA, Australia, Germany, Finland, Russia, China, Korea or Japan. It uses a multi-disciplinary approach, drawing on economics, sociology, political science/policy studies, and global studies, to investigate approaches to higher education and public goods in these countries. It also conducts interviews at OECD, UNESCO and World Bank. The research includes specific focus on identification and measurement of global public goods.

### **Modes of inquiry and data sources**

The paper will describe research design, methodology and questions. The research entails semi-structured interviews across HEIs, government, industry and other organizations. There will be 30 interviews per national system and 300 in total, a large qualitative study enabling many internal comparisons.

### **Findings**

The SRHE paper will outline the study, concepts and methodologies and report on the first two national case studies, conducted in 2012-2013 (Australia, 40 interviews, three HEIs) and 2013 (Russia, 30 interviews, two HEIs). The interview programs include interviews with personnel in HEI leadership, research-based disciplines in Engineering and Social Sciences, and government.

### **References**

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