

## Learning Gain for Private or Public Benefit? Reviewing University Responses (0209)

Christina Hughes

University of Warwick, UK

### Abstract

Learning Gain is currently constructed in much research and national policy as a private good that demonstrates the value added of student investment in their education. Is learning gain, therefore, an area of developing policy interest that can only be drawn on to further support the financialisation of higher education outcomes? This paper takes the current programme of research into learning gain being undertaken by a consortium of Russell Group universities (LEGACY) to explore how those with institutional level responsibilities for learning and teaching consider how learning gain might support both private and public good arguments. The analysis explores the variability of definitions of public and private good as well as how these are, or might be, measured. Using learning gain as a case study, the paper offers some tentative answers as to how the public and private good of university education may be articulated in the present context.

**I learned nothing in College.** Ok, ok, maybe that's an exaggeration. I learned *some* things in college. I learned that I can't stomach cheap beer; I'd rather play drinking games with a box of wine. I learned what kind of guys I should never date again. I learned how to live with kids my own age and quite frankly I do best living alone. Most importantly, I met two English professors who had a huge impact on my life, who taught me not just how to write but also to believe in myself. Meeting them made my college years worth it. For the most part, as I reflect on my undergraduate experience, I feel that it was a colossal waste of time.

[http://www.huffingtonpost.com/sarah-rose-attman/i-learned-nothing-in-coll\\_b\\_5606640.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/sarah-rose-attman/i-learned-nothing-in-coll_b_5606640.html)

This paper draws on current research into learning gain being undertaken through a consortium of eighteen Russell Group universities (LEGACY) and led by the University of Warwick. This HEFCE funded research is part of a wider programme of work (<http://www.hefce.ac.uk/lt/lg/>) that has been designed to pilot and evaluate appropriate methodologies for measuring learning gain. The LEGACY work in particular is comprised of four work packages that, variously, are designed to identify core dimensions of learning gain, develop a learning gain measurement instrument and explore a number of interventions designed to support employability. One trigger for government interest in this area was the findings of Richard Arum and Josipa Roksa (2011) who argued that for many undergraduates in the United States of America, 'drifting through college without a clear sense of purpose is readily apparent'. Such findings inevitably led to the kinds of headlines and blogs evidenced in the epigraph of this paper and, of course, underpin a UK government concern to demonstrate to students which university and which courses bring the most tangible private benefits.

In the UK, as is becoming more than familiar, the White Paper "*Success as a Knowledge Economy: Teaching Excellence, Social Mobility & Student Choice*" heralds a step change in the longer process of marketization in higher education in the UK that began in the 1980s. For some the title of Brown and Carasso's (2013) text *Everything for Sale?* might provide a useful summary of its underlying ethos. As the Alternative White Paper for Higher Education (<https://heconvention2.files.wordpress.com/2016/06/awp.pdf>) notes, the weight of the proposed legislation fails to acknowledge the wider public benefits that higher education affords.

It is certainly the case that the strongest focus in the research being undertaken within the HEFCE funded programme, including our own research within LEGACY, is concerned with the private benefits of higher education. This is perhaps not surprising given the thrust of government policy and

interests, as well how research has more fully developed in this area. It is also the case that the metrics designated for the Teaching Excellence Framework encourage institutions to focus more fully on delivering outcomes that ostensibly fall within those understood as private benefits for students.

This provides university leaders with something of a challenge as it raises the question of how universities are bringing, or might bring, the public dimensions of their work more fully into view. This is the issue that is of concern to Simon Marginson (2016) in his recent synthesis of political and economic approaches to the private/public binary in higher education. As Marginson notes, in current mainstream policy only the contribution of universities to social equity is maintained as a collective goal. Yet, as he also notes, proponents of the public contribution of higher education point to a number of key areas of value:

HEIs are said to provide opportunity for all on the basis of merit; to widen the scope for upward social mobility; to enhance the careers and lives of those they educate; to contribute to productivity and prosperity by preparing graduates for occupations, and supplying innovations for industry; to provide employment for cities and regions; to create and distribute knowledge and ideas, and advance free expression; to foster scientific literacy, and sustain intellectual conversations and artistic work; to contribute to policy and government, and prepare citizens for democratic decision-making. HEIs are said to sustain a cosmopolitan outlook and growing cross-border traffic. They encourage ecological awareness, and find solutions to global problems. (Marginson, 2016: 2).

For Marginson there are some significant problems with the public good argument, such that it tends to be normative and assumption driven, without any clear measures. In addition, there are varying definitions of 'public good' which mean we cannot be sure that we are all referring to the same benefits or outcomes. This begs a key question: "How do those with institutional wide responsibilities for learning and teaching in universities straddle this binary of private/public good?" Is it the case that the barraging processes of kettling articulated by Richard Hall (<http://www.richard-hall.org/2015/09/26/learning-gain-and-kettling-academic-labour/>) are so effective in internalizing the necessity of value-added that those whose core roles require them to design responses to government policy solely focus on private benefits with an eye to metric and league table outcomes? Or are there concerns to balance the competitive weight of current policy with attention to ensuring there is recognition of the collective economic and social benefits of university education?

This paper takes the current programme of work being undertaken by LEGACY for developing principally private measures for learning gain as a case study to ask these key questions. Through a range of interview data, it considers how those with institutional level responsibilities for learning and teaching and student experience understand the significance of learning gain to supporting private and public good arguments. The analysis explores the variability of definitions of public and private good as well as how these are, or might be, measured, and the problems inherent in doing so. It aims to offer some tentative answers as to how the public and private good of university education may be articulated in the present context.

## References

Arum, R and Roksa, J (2011) **Academically Adrift**, Chicago, University of Chicago Press

Marginson, S (2016) **Public/Private in Higher Education: A synthesis of economic and political approaches**, London, Centre for Global Higher Education Working Paper Series 1, June 2016.