

Towards measurement of higher education as a common good: possibilities and challenges

Part 2 paper

Introduction

The renewed European agenda for higher education (HE) sets the goal of “building inclusive and connected higher education systems” and ensures “that higher education institutions are not ivory towers, but civic-minded learning communities connected to their communities” (European Commission 2017, p. 6). As some authors acknowledge, “this new policy offers a more balanced approach to strengthening higher education’s contribution to society, including not only economic development but also social inclusion and social progress” (Klemenčič 2018, p. 2).

Against this background, the paper aims to address the following main research question: What are the empirical manifestations of higher education as a common good? In order to answer this question, we will: 1) outline a theoretical framework for conceptualising higher education as a common good; 2) develop an index for measuring the extent to which higher education has been realised as a common good in a given country; 3) reveal whether countries fall into distinct clusters with regard to the extent of higher education being practised as a common good.

Conceptual considerations

Our understanding of HE as a common good is based on *an attempt to combine ideas from philosophical discussions on common goods with the neo-classical economics approach*. Both perspectives share an emphasis on the inclusive/shared character of common goods, manifested in both their production and use.

The discussion of possibilities for understanding HE as a common good outlines new and fruitful perspectives for rethinking and reimagining the essence of HE and its role in contemporary societies. It means that HE unfolds in mutual social relationships and is therefore a kind of collective endeavour in which different and diverse social actors/institutions are involved.

HE is a common good in and for a given community/society provided it “is immanent within the relationships that bring this community or society into being” (Hollenbach 2002, p. 9). This understanding of HE emphasises its complex nature and the plurality of its roles and values, which go beyond its instrumental function, and acknowledges its empowering and transformative mission, as well. Thus, HE as a common good is closely related to concepts such as justice, rights (Walker and Boni 2013), solidarity, and equality (Marginson 2016). That is why we argue that *the extent to which HE is accomplished as a common good in a given society/country reflects its accessibility, availability, and affordability and the commitment of society and all its influential actors to this goal.*

Methodology

Data

The empirical basis of our study is made up of country level data drawn from various sources: EUROSTUDENT Surveys V (2012–2015) and VI (2016–2018), official statistics from Eurostat and UNESCO, and the European Commission’s Education and Training Monitor 2016 report. We include only countries for which we had data for all indicators and for the latest year possible. Thus, we limit the analysis to 13 countries: Croatia, the Czech Republic, Estonia, Finland, France, Lithuania, Malta, the Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Slovakia, Slovenia, and Sweden.

Index calculation

We introduce an index to capture the extent to which HE has been realised as a common good in a given country. The index includes indicators spread across four conceptual dimensions: *accessibility, availability, and affordability* of and *social commitment* to HE. It ranges between 0 and 100.

Cluster analysis

We also applied a cluster analysis which was made with regard to the categories comprising the overall score of the index of HE as a common good.

Results and discussion of the results

The analysis shows that there are the significant differences between countries in terms of the extent to which HE as a common good has been accomplished, with the Northern European countries scoring the highest and Malta scoring the lowest. However, it seems that in none of the countries studied has HE as a common good been put into practice completely so far.

The cluster analysis enabled us to identify four distinctive groups of countries, which we have designated as: 1) *reality* (Finland, Sweden, the Netherlands, and Norway), 2) *feasible* (Lithuania and Poland), 3) *ambiguous* (Estonia, France, and Slovenia), and 4) *problematic* (Croatia, the Czech Republic, Malta, and Slovakia).

There are only a few classifications of HE systems in the literature which capture how, in different countries, HE performs specific functions or serves concrete principles and values. Triventi (2014) suggests a multidimensional empirical classification of HE systems on the basis of several institutional characteristics likely to affect student participation and social inequality. Although the Triventi's classification differs from ours because they are based on different indicators and include different countries, in both classifications the Nordic countries

stand out as being characterised by high levels of participation in HE, lower social inequality, and strong public engagement in the funding of HE. Saar, Ure and Desjardins (2013) present a classification of adult learning systems and link it to varieties of capitalism approach.

However, neither the position nor any characteristics of HE are clearly discussed in this classification.

Conclusion

On a theoretical level, the paper contributes to further conceptualising HE as a common good. A common-good perspective provides grounds for a humanistic approach to HE, centred around the issues of accessibility and inclusion, and also promotes the values of solidarity and justice in the educational sphere and its governance. On a methodological level, the paper develops an index for measuring the extent to which HE as a common good has been realised in different countries.

We see several directions for future research within two broad perspectives: 1) further deepening the conceptualisation of HE as a common good; 2) exploring different directions for developing a methodology with which to explore the dynamics of how HE unfolds as a common good in specific national contexts over time and for enriching the set of indicators used to measure HE as a common good.

The paper also has clear political implications as it provides theoretical conceptualisations and develops a methodological instrument — an index of HE as a common good — for assessing the effectiveness of national policies in the sphere of HE across Europe.

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