Webb Sue

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Community engagement and the idea of a 'good university' (0120)

Today when increasingly politicians, university leaders, researchers and all of us as citizens are implicated in the changing relationship between the public and private funding and benefits of universities, not only, in the UK, but also more widely, it is timely to consider the idea of universities and the 'public good'. At the same time, as recent expansion and massification of higher education systems exhibit the dual processes of differentiation and stratification identified by Trow (1972), critical theorists concerned with research for equity and transformation have turned their attention to explicating the relationship between universities and the 'public good' (Colhoun, 2006). Within this context, community engagement has become an increasingly significant strand of activity for many universities in the UK over the past decade and it is often presented as an example of 'public good' (UUK, 2007). Yet, engaging universities in the development of knowledge for and about the public and in concerns about who should have access to this knowledge is not a new idea. Community engagement has had a long history of association with the development of the modern university from the 19th century onwards, both in the UK and worldwide. However, the activities encompassed by the term community engagement vary extensively. For some it is a concept that is embedded in the core purposes of higher education, for example, where it played a central role in the establishment of the Victorian civic universities in the UK and the Land Grant universities in the USA (Watson, 2007). For others, it is a more recent idea, which is used to describe relationships built around teaching and research between universities and their communities, whether these are local, regional, national or international (Boyer, 1990). In both of these accounts it is presented as a good thing and as an indicator of the contribution of the university to 'public good'.

This paper is provides a contribution to these debates through applying both a conceptual and empirical analysis. The paper is organised into three parts. The first considers the historical and socio-political context of the debate about universities and the 'public good' including why this debate has re-emerged in the last decade and its significance for community engagement; the second draws on political philosophy to identify different understandings of good to provide a framework for an educational policy analysis of the rhetorical use of the term 'good' in current rankings and benchmarking of universities, including those designed to measure and benchmark community engagement in the UK and the USA; and the third section examines a case study of one university in the UK to explore its institutional narrative(s) and practices in relation to community engagement today. A unifying theme in this paper is a discussion of the idea of a 'good university'. The 'good university' is a concept informed by Lawler's (2005) account of internationalism and the 'good' state, which is one that is committed to moral purposes beyond itself. Throughout, the paper plays with the meaning of 'good' by asking the following questions of current benchmarking and classifying systems for community engagement and of the university narrative(s) and practices in the case study: 1. What meaning of good is being employed? 2. Who determines this meaning? 3. Who benefits? and 4. How is good produced and sustained? Through the application of these questions the paper will engage with the concern of this symposium, that is, higher education, equity and public good.

The paper concludes by arguing that community engagement has joined the list of indicators used to measure the performance of universities in several countries worldwide. To date, the extent to which these measure have more in common with

those other tools of audit, new public management and marketing and public relations than they have with a concept of public good, is still an open question. For some institutions the rationale for community engagement is closely linked with their historic missions and arguably does sit more easily with a notion of 'good' based on doing what is right, rather than doing what maximises the greatest rewards. Whilst for others, community engagement has become the new malleable term for new times that neatly and usefully updates and replaces that slippery and now old and often exclusionary term, lifelong learning (Burke and Jackson, 2007; Field, 2006). To ascertain whether or not the turn towards communities in the discourses and practices of community engagement will further the project for social justice requires further empirical work, and the development of more multi-sited cases. Nevertheless, from the analysis of the case study presented the turn towards community engagement can be understood as a strategy of re-envisioning the mission of some universities and a countervailing activity to the globalising tendencies of differentiation, selectivity and exclusivity that mark the discussions of 'good' in market economies focused on league tables. However, institutions cannot escape completely the market expectations to be position-takers and to be positioned in all activities with which they engage. Thus utilitarian and instrumental notions of good are likely to pervade even those activities, such as community engagement, where institutions seek to link to a more categorical notion of good through doing the right thing to promote social justice. However well meaning are the strategies driven by those rediscovering their institutional missions and legacy narratives to be a 'good university', it is likely that there will be equally forceful internal and external pressures from the audit and accounting culture to identify the costs and benefits of such activities. Intervention in these debates requires not only the analysis derived from further empirical work, but also as this paper has argued, it requires a critical and philosophical engagement with diverse liberal understandings of the concept of 'good'. Without this, institutional claims and position taking as a 'good university' should be treated with caution.