

Regional governance of higher education: Purpose, values and academic capitalism - the case of the small Gulf states (0183)

In the United Kingdom as elsewhere, decisions in and about every aspect of the business of higher education are made with an eye firmly on immediate financial return, while academics and ideologues argue that such 'marketisation' de-values higher education. Yet in terms of higher education as a modernist tool for the production of skilled and loyal citizens, a higher education 'market' is hardly a new phenomenon. Even in terms of higher education *itself* as a product, with students as consumers, there has actually long been a 'quasi-market', with state governments acting simply as fund-holding intermediaries (Williams, 1999). What *is* novel, however, is the extent to which higher education is now seen as an investment commodity, by stakeholders other than students. Higher education begins to look indistinct from other commodities and there is correspondingly less attention from either government or investors to the things that make higher education a 'public good', or public policy, matter.

So what chance for the kind of governance that is framed around the public good? Governance is widely agreed to be about the following procedural things: administering steering mechanisms, regulation, management. It has been contended that educational governance today is actually a matter, above all, of managing data (Ozga et al, 2011). But procedures miss out the question of purpose. Unlike new public management, governance is primarily about distribution of resources. It is concerned, in structured and value-imbued ways, with how to distribute what, to whom, on what grounds, to what ends. It involves: the discussion and articulation of principles, values, purpose, goals and objectives; the articulation of external frames of reference; the balancing of external directives and internal needs; and public scrutiny.

As part of a social contract with citizens, therefore, higher education governance is, or should be, guided by the question: What is the purpose of higher education today? Answers that draw on the political and ideological nature of higher education would prioritise the public good, or the creation of citizenry in which political literacy can be seen as the essence. Such a form of governance would reflect broad notions of capital including political literacy, socialisation, culture, intellect – even 'human rights' (Davis, 2007:165). It is a vision more prevalent in the older, and wealthier, UK universities, while the new universities tend to be preoccupied with managing income and expenditure.

In an unstable world with increasingly fewer boundaries this endeavour and these forms of capital, however, are both important and need *joined-up* governance. While 'educational policy regions' are seen as a cornerstone of educational globalisation, for higher education no less than for school, such regional governance (structured trans-national sharing of policy and practice, and discussion about purpose and values) is severely challenged by current forms of academic capitalism.

But there is variance. The European Union's recent attempts at organised higher educational policy sharing have produced joint frameworks for governance that deploy items from the ideological arsenal, though these are undermined by their operational fragility in the face of a strong residual pluralism.

One might expect the strong historical regionalism of the small Arab Gulf states to have evolved into a model of shared higher educational governance with more weight than this example from the EU. As a region of recent developmental states, rich in natural resources, but lacking a knowledge economy, the obvious priority on gaining wealth and sovereignty has been to invest in higher education. The past forty years or so, and particularly the past decade, have seen a proliferation of types of HEI, spanning the public-private and 'academic-training' distinctions in infinite ways. Vast numbers of people, especially women, go onto higher education, which is highly valued as a 'continuation' of basic education. The modernist function of higher education in the production of a citizenry via selective transmission of

culture and skills has thus been striking. Higher education has also long been a symbol and tool of social and political change in the wider Arab region, including various forms of nationalism and anti-Imperialist resistance (from Arabism to nation-state formation in the 1960s/70s to Islamist and pro-democracy movements). Thus higher education continues to both control and shape resistance in the region (Rizvi and Lingard, 2010:79).

Yet the reverse appears to have happened – rampant academic capitalism of the type described above, which can be illustrated in three ways. First, development is seen overwhelmingly in economic terms: increasing – outside investment, the number of HEIs, the number of graduates. The policy literature implies an assumption that the links between these are simple, stable and unproblematic. Second, governments have moved away from investing in higher education for the public good to inviting investment in higher education as if it were real estate – it is said to be “recession-proof”. The particular relationship between public and private here can be seen in the phenomenon of ‘branch campuses’, enterprises where private foreign providers play public roles in the importing countries, sponsored by local business and in receipt of government licences. Richer students have the pick of all the universities, public and private, while poorer students have to go to the public ones. The citizenry-forming function of higher education is also undermined by the fact that in some of the small Gulf states, the majority of residents, pupils and students are expatriate workers and their families. Third, the consequent fragmentation of regional and even state policy and governance has depleted a sense of purpose or direction. You will look long and hard for even the sort of public policy declarations, on either regional *or* national level, that emerge from the EU’s higher education policy spaces. Policy literature is dominated by reports of who has met who recently, and marketing material. But very little detailed educational content. Where the terms ‘discussion’ and ‘develop’ do appear, the terms of reference are more closely aligned to providing resources for investors, keeping an up-to-date educational database, and providing educational ‘services’

In this case, such an extreme form of educational capitalism can be seen as both symptom and cause of lack of strong governance. Even in procedural terms (administering steering mechanisms, regulation, national and regional sharing of data), there appears to be a striking lack of certain aspects of governance. The deficit is larger in the more substantive terms: discussion of principles, values, purpose, goals and objectives; coordination; public scrutiny etc. So far as distribution (of resources) to produce the wide benefit is concerned, while there is an acute sense of who *is* a ‘citizen’ and what their economic rights are, the extent to which higher education (provision and participation) is part of the social contract has rapidly diminished. The striking lack of joined-up governance can be partly explained by timing. Calls to invest in higher education in the region happened at a time when there were no local traditions of governance of a modern, mass education system. The rush to borrow foreign traditions and structures has done little to help consolidate local governing capacity. Mediating the exchange of higher educational data and resources without any sense of guiding principles or public good is as an *abrogation* of governance. In these examples, higher education itself is being used as an economic resource – for some other end, and for those with existing capital.

Such fragmentation-commodification among states better equipped than most to embrace regional governance casts doubt on the robustness of the idea of *any* form of higher education governance in such an open global market. For the Gulf countries themselves, in the current climate of instability across the Arab world, this matters. It matters that higher education governance is not driven by the question of whether systems and institutions are producing the things (knowledge, skills, citizens) that will help solve the world’s serious problems? Without attention to this, mere financial survival in an over-subscribed field is rather empty and pointless. For the rest of the world, the worst excesses of commodification of Gulf higher education provides a cautionary tale.