

Friday 9 December**11.30-12.30****Chepstow****The Higher Education Theory Group (RS5)**

The theory network has been grappling with the problem of what can be considered theory in higher education. This raises questions such as:

Do theories arise out of systematic observations of the current state of higher education?

Can theories help in making predictions of what is likely to happen or should happen?

Is the study of higher education value laden?

How can we avoid the traps that are set because most of those who study higher education are themselves a part of what they are theorising?

The annex to this note gives a short summary of the discussions of the group so far that embrace these questions.

As mass higher education evolves into universal higher education (with more than 50% of the population taking part at some time in their lives) massive debates about its purpose and practice, and costs and benefits are taking place. It was relatively easy to claim that a small meritocratic system was serving a public good by ensuring that the most able people were educated appropriately to fill the most influential positions in the economic, social, political and cultural spheres of activity. This was essentially the position of the Robbins Committee fifty years ago. Of course there were debates about the justice of restricting access to relatively few people and whether it was really the most able who were benefitting, but that is to raise further questions. But when higher education reaches more than half the population and is very diverse in character, with some people benefitting enormously from it and others very little, its public good is not so clear cut. Is the public good nothing more than the sum of the individual benefits derived from getting a degree?

In the short symposium at the 2011 SRHE conference Denise Batchelor, Gareth Williams and Paul Temple, will make short presentations of their current thinking following the discussions in particular of the Theory Group's seminar on higher education as a public good (see Annex). Other members of SRHE, in particular the theory group, are encouraged to make presentations (of not more than five minutes please). If you would like to do so please contact Helen at srheoffice@srhe.ac.uk or Denise at batched@hotmail.com or Gareth at g.williams@ioe.ac.uk

The Higher Education Theory Group

During its first year the Higher Education Theory Group has been exploring theoretical approaches to the study of higher education from different social science perspectives. The first half day seminar considered how some economists, sociologists and policy thinkers have approached higher education research. Pedro Teixeira presented an economic perspective: *Sense and Sensibility: Reflections about the origins, the promises and the pitfalls of an economic analysis of higher education*. He examined the development of the economics of higher education from the 19th century onwards, and evaluated its potential contribution to higher education studies. Mary Henkel offered a social theory perspective: *The social dimension of theory development in higher education: all change?* She focused on the contribution of sociology to the development of theory in higher education, and examined two different eras of higher education research: Burton Clark and his work, and the contemporary period. Peter Scott adopted a political stance: *Following Political Fashions and Theorising Higher Education*. Taking an historical perspective, he traced five ages of higher education theory through the dominant ideas underlying the development and shaping of higher education.

In the second seminar we looked at the theoretical background to a specific topic of current concern – the relationship between the public and the private in higher education. Paul Standish, drawing mainly on the work of Derrida and Lyotard, examined the pressures imposed by a culture of accountability on the ways of thinking that constitute the university. He examined the nature of the relation between the private and the public roles of higher education. The strategic orientation of Robert Cowen's talk was towards two puzzling themes: (i) the ways in which changing definitions of universities as a public good rewrite pedagogic relations and definitions of good teaching and learning and (ii) the characteristics of the current 'transitological moment' which is redefining the UK higher education system. Nick Barr explained that from an economic point of view the issue was ultimately a matter of who benefits and who pays. He claimed that for an economist higher education can never be a fully public or fully private good but he was critical, mainly for technical reasons, of current attempts to rebalance the relationship in England. Jon Nixon, reminding participants that higher education is not synonymous with the university, claimed that the institutional connectivity between higher education, further education, secondary schooling, primary schooling, and early-years provision needed to be reimagined. He also suggested that we look at ways in which higher education might help re-define forms of civic engagement, and we should acknowledge that the public good must now be defined with reference to a pluralist world society. David Dill suggested that, consistent with principal-agent theory, the most effective institutional framework for assuring the public good in higher education appears to be providing incentives to reform and strengthen the collegial mechanisms by which the members of the academic profession monitor, socialize, and reinforce the values essential to effective university teaching, research, and public service.

Rania Filippakou and Gareth Williams are now editing a book on the theme of *Higher Education as a Public Good: Critical Perspectives on Theory, Policy and Practice*, which is based in large part on these two seminars.