Learning Gain for Private or Public Benefit? Reviewing University Responses

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A Personal Concern

We value what we measure

We should measure what we value

Learning gain in policy discourse is largely an issue of the acquisition of a private good
The Question

0 How do those with institutional wide responsibilities for learning and teaching in universities straddle the binary of private/public good?
0 Do they, as 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, as popular rhetoric would suggest?
0 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?
Changing Times

The HERB makes provision for the OfS to enforce a ‘public interest governance condition’ (HERB Part I, 14 (2-3)) intended to ensure that higher education providers perform their functions in the public interest...... Defining public interest in terms of value for money for the taxpayer or the public purse is a very narrow interpretation.......this definition of public interest excludes the many other activities that universities have traditionally undertaken in the public interest and have the capacity to undertake in the future.

(Rammell, 2016)
LEGACY - Learning and Employability Gain Assessment Community

- 18 Russell Group Universities
  - Birmingham, Bristol, Durham, Cambridge, Exeter, Imperial, Kings, Leeds, Liverpool, Manchester, Newcastle, Nottingham, Queen Mary, Sheffield, Southampton, UCL, Warwick, York

- HEFCE Pilot Programme
- 3 Years
  - Oct 2015 – Sept 2018
- 4 Work Packages
  - Measurement of Learning Gain
  - 3 Concerned with Employability (R2Strengths; International Experience; Career Adaptabilities)
Methodology

0 Pilot study: four key areas;
   0 Understandings of higher education as a private and public good;
   0 The role of universities as contributing to these public and private goods;
   0 The opportunities and barriers respondents experience in supporting public and private good outcomes in their daily work;
   0 Understandings of how learning gain fits within respondents’ concepts of public and private goods.

0 Piloted with those with key roles in Russell Group universities for the delivery of learning and teaching; employability; and those with specific interests in learning gain;
0 Empirical elements drew on the work of Melanie Walker, Monica McLean, Linda East and Rebecca Stokes.
Private Good- And Hardly a Word about Earnings

- It’s confusing ....
- University as a private good for me relates to my personal transformation and at least intellectual if not social liberation, and the ability to provide liberty of thought and life choices for my family, in a way I would not have had without university education and employment.
- Increasing recognition that higher education may reinforce inequalities and hence the very high private gains from HE in the labour market may imply some social problems arising from HE, as a national and global elite emerges from HE.
- Education for the private good to me means giving students the opportunity to develop their learning potential and mature into individuals who can think critically, make connections, and creatively explore not only within their subject area but in approaching life more generally.
- University for the private good should have a transformative impact on the individual that is not necessarily immediately evident (therefore not necessarily measurable through ‘immediate’ results) but might trigger developmental processes that take time to mature and produce successful outcomes.
Public Goods – a trajectory

I see HE for the public good to include the employability angle obviously, and to extend to research endeavours; contribution to the local economy (volunteering; labour market; student use of accommodation, shops, bars); policy at the local, regional, national and international level; reputation of UK for excellence in HE.

Perhaps naively, I believe that an education focussed on the process rather than outcomes ultimately has the potential to achieve/deliver both for the private and the public good. The collective social benefits of higher education are achieved though individual excellence and commitment.

Graduates may make those they lead and work with reproductive, generating economic spillovers and benefit for the economy and society. Equally higher education has social benefits in the behaviours of graduates (more likely to vote) and again this implies a wider social benefit that brings benefit beyond the personal gain to the individual.

It’s the reason I work in education: making a contribution to society and our collective future through the impact that (higher) education has on the life on individuals. Increasingly, it has become a personal political driver too, in the national and institutional work I engage in. Regrettably it is also becoming the least respected reason outside the public sector for engaging in the public sector, and that in itself is perhaps the best reason to keep investing in this sector.
The Role of Universities – A case of misrecognition?

0 I think this is currently not made explicit to the student.

0 Universities need to be conscious of the need to generate not just individual benefit (giving students the skills they need in the labour marker) but also wider social benefit (teaching graduates the value of different epistemological positions, how to contribute to civic society, the value of creating a more equal society etc)
Professional Opportunities and Barriers – Now is a mixed blessing

- In the private [realm], if this is about the student’s intrinsic experience, we offer impartial careers guidance which supports students in helping to pull together and make sense of their experiences in order to make plans and implement decisions post-university as well as maximize the opportunities available to them whilst they are students - e.g. extra-curricular activities

- A good part of what I do responds or contributes to national policy. Where I can, I will refer to or reopen the debate on the value of HE as a social; (and cultural) good. It appears highly necessary to do so in the current political and social climate.

- Oddly, the work we're doing currently on building structure, governance and direction for L&T at XXXXX is a fantastic opportunity to build a renewed understanding of social and cultural good and ambition. Even more oddly, Brexit probably gave the community the wake up call to renew out commitment to future societal and cultural development.

- I try to balance institutional priorities and pedagogic principles in the training and support we provide, but I am aware of the constraints faced by colleagues in everyday practice because of the tension between the desire to experiment to achieve excellence and innovation in learning and the need to play it safe because of metrics.

- Lack of access to policy makers at a point when your voice can be heard and taken into account when policy is being formed, e.g. LG, TEF; lack of alignment between institutional priorities and those at the sharp end of delivering to students, research councils; lack of commitment from senior management to make this an institutional priority.
Learning Gain – how to measure?

It comes down to who is doing the measuring and what for. There may be qualitative benefits that are hard to quantify with data and which do not readily appease those measuring private learning gain. Sometimes learning gain may not move in along a continuous trajectory even though this in itself may demonstrate learning is taking place.

The national agenda of learning gain is private advantage based; learning gain in personal terms is impossible to measure (there is good EU research on this, but who wants to use EU research with politicians now) whilst learning gain in societal terms can be measured but current politicians will view that to be a failure; there is an overlap between private interest and societal interest in HE which is where in my view the only possible learning gain measuring is possible (and of interest).
Learning Gain – Universities are not Schools

The real challenge here is achieving the following:

1) sufficient accountability - universities cannot be left alone to do what they want otherwise students miss out

2) the right kind of accountability - make sure we provide an incentive for universities to focus on what we think is valuable not what is easy to measure, long run economic and social outcomes not short term "gameable" outcomes

3) recognise the challenge that much of the social good of universities comes via their research, their role as a public debating space, the challenge they provide, and the teaching that they do.

The UK does have world leading higher education because of the combination of all of this. We could devise a system which maximises learning gain on a specific measure or outcome that would result in considerably less private and social benefit from higher education as it would crowd our the activity that is huge benefit but that might get in the way of providing the perfect teaching experience for students.

In other words universities are not schools....