Higher Education and the Achievement (and Prevention) Of Democracy and Social Justice

Rajani Naidoo
University of Bath

As indicated, the aim in our paper has been to engage with the research on higher education and social justice in order to develop a research agenda for the long term sustainability of higher education. The paper therefore aims to make visible and opens up for discussion the challenges, the tensions and the dilemmas faced by higher education. What I would like to do in this presentation is to pick up on and problematise some of the issues that we allude to in our paper in relation to 3 wider benefits of higher education. These are, first, the contribution of higher education to economic development; second, the role of higher education in contributing to the public good and third, the contribution of higher education to democracy.

So to begin with: Higher Education and Economic Development

Higher Education’s contribution to economic development has been positioned in the context of the knowledge based economy as one of the most important components of the wider benefits of higher education. This faith in higher education as a motor of economic development relies heavily on the high skills thesis. This states that for a country to remain globally competitive, large sections of the workforce need to acquire high level skills since value added products and services are crucial resources in the scramble for global profits. Higher education is thus expected to act as an incubator for economically productive knowledge and to equip growing sections of the school leaving population with intellectual capital. The advanced skills base is expected to turn some countries into magnet economies. The expectation is that these countries will attract corporate and multinational investment leading to economic growth which will trickle down to all sectors of society.

One of the areas that our paper opens up is to place the assumptions which link the expansion of higher education, economic development and equity under critical scrutiny. While it is true that in many high income countries many traditional manual jobs such as coal mining have disappeared and that certain types of professional and managerial jobs have increased in number, low skilled jobs exist and continue to grow. In reality, therefore, low, intermediate and high skills jobs co-exist, will continue to do so and may even give competitive advantage. In this context the focus on higher education in isolation as an engine for economic development which is automatically expected to lead to social mobility may have certain adverse consequences. First, it may divert attention away from the interlocking potential of low, intermediate and high skills and the possibilities of developing an education and training strategy that links up rather than bifurcates different levels of education and training. Second, when higher education and its expansion is posed as the most important route for social mobility, less attention is paid to wider economic and social policies for social justice. Third, in the light of the realities of the global economy, it is questionable whether further
investment in education and skills will deliver the promised high skilled, high waged jobs to a majority of workers in advanced economies. Instead, what we find across many high income countries is a rise in wage inequalities. Interestingly enough, this has not been blamed on the fact that the proportion of high skilled, high waged jobs is limited by the occupational structure. Rather blame is laid at the door of higher education and its supposed inability to make a larger proportion of the workforce employable. In addition, Lauder, Brown and Aston have raised questions about the assumption that low skilled jobs will be dependent on price and will tend to migrate to developing countries with low wages while high skilled jobs will be dependent on quality and will move to advanced economies. The results from their recent ESRC funded project which includes interviews with leading multi-nationals show that if knowledge is the key asset of the new economy, the task of business is not to pay more for it but less. There are at least two strategies that companies adopt to pay less for more. The first strategy is by accessing highly skilled graduates from rapidly growing economies such as India and China, many of whom will work for a far lower wage than those in the West. In other words the global auction for skills will be based on high skills but lower wages. The second strategy that companies will adopt is through processes that the authors term Digital Taylorism through which expertise is extracted from individuals and placed in technological systems which then require less skills and less discretion to run. According to the authors, this may eventually result in a reduction of elite knowledge workers and greater polarity between elite and other knowledge workers. However given that higher education does offer opportunities for social mobility for some, it is important to reiterate that none of this is an argument for narrowing participation in higher education. Rather it points to the problems that lie with the current obsession with higher educations’ contribution to economic development and employment and argues for bringing into better balance higher education’s social, political and cultural functions.

The second issue that I wish to raise is the private and the public good nature of higher education. The first questions we are faced with is Who exactly is the Public? Are there many Publics? Is the public merely the dominant group in society? What is a ‘Good’ and what is a ‘Bad’ in this context? Much of the discussion has been based on a false dichotomy which has distinguished between the public and private good nature of higher education in relation to ownership and funding. Paradoxically in the era of elite higher education, public sector institutions with state funding were considered automatically to contribute to the public good. However, as soon as we moved into the era of mass higher education, there was a major paradigm shift and the public good nature versus the private good nature of higher education was delegitimized and questioned. It would be very interesting to think about some of the reasons why this has been the case. However, as the recent collection by Jurgen Enders illustrates, there is a great deal of empirical evidence which shows that the goods of higher education can be private or public or a mixture of the two and can be produced by either private or public institutions. In fact what we most often find is a complex mixing of the private and the public in the same institution. In addition, the private and public good functions of higher education are not necessarily zero sum. Rather than one excluding the other, they may be interdependent in that the production of one kind of good provides conditions necessary to the other.
In addition, it is unhelpful to treat public and private as if they are fixed and natural attributes. As Simon Marginson has indicated, they are policy sensitive, nested in culture and vary in time and place. Public or private character of HE is therefore a policy choice dependent on funding and regulatory mechanisms. Perhaps we need to conduct research needs on which functions rather than which parts of the higher education system need to be publicly funded and protected. This could be through rules and sanctions but also through providing incentives so that institutions contribute to public goals. Finally, definitions of the public good revolve around the idea of the good of the nation state. While cross border higher education is increasing, it is generally associated with the production of increased private goods. There is little discussion of the extent to which higher education can, and should contribute to the global public good.

The third issue that I would like to raise is the relationship between higher education and democracy. Martha Nussbaum in a recent speech in Peru has asserted that all modern democracies are currently facing an education crisis, brought on by the rush to profit in the global market. She argues that as many nations see their prosperity linked to technical achievement and the learning of marketable skills, a new conception of education has become dominant around the world, and it spells grave danger for democracy. In this new conception, education is technical and mechanistic and suspicious of critical independence of mind. She quotes John Dewey "Achievement comes to denote the sort of thing that a well-planned machine can do better than a human being can. Other commentators have spoken about how the rise of consumerism with its supposed strategies of choice and exit is in danger of replacing notions of democracy and political scientists talk about the transition from input to output democracy. If we believe that democracy is in danger and if we believe that higher education should promote democracy how do we go about this? Do we hope that a student studying Mathematics will develop these understandings as if by osmosis by virtue of being in a university environment? Or do we integrate skills for democracy explicitly within each discipline? Or do we develop courses incorporating issues such as ethics and democracy that all students take? Can we afford this? And what are the real costs of deciding that we cannot afford this? And the issue of democracy ties in very closely of course with academic freedom. Many commentators have argued that academic freedom is under threat from the corporatisation of the university, from an unwillingess to offend and from an unwillingness to tolerate views that are held as being offensive. Steve Fuller has argued that academic freedom present a distinct case for freedom of speech and it is not what that is argued that is important or how offensive it is but how an argument is delivered and whether it is open to reasoned debate. My own view is that we have little understanding of the operation of academic freedom and it is important not to think about it in a reified and abstract way. We need to think about whether academics should have special privileges not enjoyed by others? How do we develop the parameters for academic freedom? Do certain responsibilities come with these privileges? And most importantly, what are the conditions internal and external to the university necessary for the maintenance of academic freedom?