A case for publically funded higher education: the university as a public good

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In the following I am going to confine myself to the case of the universities as a particular type of institution in higher education and try to make a contribution to the case for its public funding by suggesting a language that could be adopted in putting forward the argument. To begin and considering the constraints of time, I will take recourse in some working definitions. The first is that the university in the sense used here is an institution that is centred on scholarship, fundamental as well as applied research, and preparation for the professions across all disciplines sharing a single space of possible interaction and interdisciplinarity. The second definition concerns the nature of the public good. Here I think it is useful to distinguish between ‘public good’, ‘investment good’ and ‘consumption good’.

Briefly, a public good in the sense of J.S. Mill is one that benefits the whole community and which cannot and should not be left in private hands [traditional examples have included national defence, health and educational systems]. An investment good is one that also benefits the whole community and is worth public investment of money but which demands pre-defined and measurable returns [the usual example of this good is the benefit of employable graduates to an economy]. It is often based on the theory of human capital and how this type of investment can be beneficial to a whole society and economy. A consumption good, finally, is a private good that is worth individual investment and which brings considerable consumption returns [the example given here is, of course, the increased earning power of a graduate over a school-leaver over a career.]

The university can be viewed, defined, structured and funded as any one of these goods and it would seem clear that the university embodies or contributes to all of these goods. Consequently, there is little value in claiming that it should be defined in terms of any one of these goods alone. Particularly for our seminar today, there is little value in arguing that the university should be defined exclusively as a public good and to reject or try to ignore its part in producing the other goods. However, what is at issue is the careful articulation of that good-type which is the public one, since this good type has fallen out of the discourse on universities and [perhaps as a consequence] has suffered from a lack of conceptual development and academic attention. One consequence has been the increasing marketization of universities, a move which holds the danger of the complete loss of the university to the public sphere.

I would like to offer three ideas that can be drawn upon to construct a contemporary understanding of the public good of a university that can be used to support its claim for public funding. None of these is a new idea but there is still some important work to be done to develop them [and it will need people employed in the interests of the public good to do this!]

The first is the idea of social cohesion and equality
The second is the fostering and understanding of cultural and moral values

The third is the questioning of all knowledge and disciplinary foundations and histories as artefacts of power and social and personal imaginaries.

Again, it is important to point out that these ideas are specific to the idea of the public good of the university and do not contradict or oppose necessarily either the investment or consumption goods, though the possibility of conflict is present. It is perhaps also worth pointing out that these are ‘big ideas’, even ‘lofty ideals’, but they are public ideas and therefore necessarily big and not to be shied away from.

Taking these ideas briefly in reverse order, the idea of instilling and even requiring criticality with regard to knowledge and its uses is one that sits perhaps most easily with the traditional university. It is a culture that leads a university community into long-term fundamental research and scholarship in the pursuit of truth, even hopefully a truth that does good. This task requires robust academic freedom, public trust and courage, and a large degree on non-interference by political and bureaucratic powers of the day.

The fostering of cultural and even moral values is also a task that does not have obvious economic benefits but a task that would seem precisely in the wide public interest in an era of rapid cultural change and global cultural interaction and sometimes confrontation. At a more personal level, a graduate with critical knowledge and a questioning disposition should also leave an academic community as a better friend, family member, partner and lover. This is a task that traditional universities did not have in times of a cultural homogeneity among the university elite.

Finally, a new and crucial public good and legitimate public demand on the university is that it is a place of social cohesion and equality. All who have the desire to engage with knowledge in a critical, questioning way and who will engage with their own and others’ cultures should not only have access to the university but should find an inclusive and supportive environment to becoming a ‘graduate in the public good’ as well as an ‘employable graduate’.

In summary, universities can and should be institutions of public as well as investment and private good. The public good idea has to be developed further, the universities have not yet done enough, have to change and re-view themselves, and this aspect of their task has to be placed under public, democratic and not managerial accountability. A mature and reflective society can achieve this.

Thank you.