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Is there a need to debate the role of higher education and the public good?

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Abstract

Calls for sustaining and increasing investment in higher education are often made on the basis that higher education is a `public good'. The idea of higher education as a public good is frequently conceptualized in terms of its contribution to economic development. If more people participate in higher education then society as a whole will benefit.

Outside of the economic benefits of higher education there is less debate as to what is meant by `public good' in the context of higher education. This paper explores higher education as *a public good* and its role *in realizing the public good* (Jonathan 2001).

With particular reference to Ireland, this paper also looks at the impact of conceptualizing the `public good' role of higher education from an economic perspective, and what this implies for students, higher education institutions and society.

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Higher education and the public/private good debate

Higher education – a public versus a private good

There is a queue outside the door of higher education. Government, employers, community activists, politicians, trade unions along with the aspiring higher education student call on higher education to meet their needs. Higher education in Ireland, as in many other countries, is still in the main funded by the state. On this basis its constituents are entitled to ask and seek responses to their questions on the type of educational service being provided, and whether it is responding to their particular needs. It is unlikely that there are any callers to the door of higher education who do not have or represent some vested interest. It is not the questions that are asked of higher education or the demands for service from various interest groups that present a difficulty. It is the lack of a broader based questioning about the role of publicly funded higher education in society in the new millennium. Are decisions for higher education to diversify its funding base and engage in an increasing number of partnerships, particularly with industry (Skilbeck 2001: 13), being taken *for* society, without engaging *with* society on the potential implications on the lives of students and society as a whole?

The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD 2004) recommended that the Irish Government confirm that higher education institutions that generate income from sources outside of state funding will not have such income taken when state funding is being calculated, as this `will remove any disincentive to institutions to generate additional resources by their own efforts and will encourage institutional diversity' (OECD 2004: 24).

When one attempts to clarify whether higher education is a public good one enters very murky water. Writers such as Hufner (2003) have attempted to analyse the difference between a `public' and a `private' good. From an economic perspective a

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public good, it is argued, has two important qualities. First, it has what is termed a `non-rival aspect', which means that it should be capable of being used by people without diminishing what is available to others. Second, it has a `non-excludable aspect' which implies that usage by persons should not prevent usage by others. (Hufner 2003: 339-340). As public goods therefore should be equally available to all they cannot be provided for profit, and the state via public funding should seek to equalize the possibility of all its citizens participating in higher education.

In theory therefore if all barriers, not just direct financial ones could be overcome, all citizens could, if they chose, participate in higher education. However, accessing higher education does not provide any guarantees as to the type or quality of higher education these citizens would receive. Equally, the state makes no call on participants in higher education, beyond the expectation that they will be better placed to gain employment and thus be able to fulfil their legal taxation obligations, and in turn make their contribution to publicly funded goods such as education.

Participating in higher education confers private benefits on individual members of society. These benefits have been described as possessing both `intrinsic' and `exchange' value conferring `personal emancipation' and `individual advantage' respectively (Jonathan 1997: 59-67). The OECD study, *Education at a Glance* (2003), notes that in all of the countries covered by the OECD study those who participated in higher education `earn substantially more than upper secondary and post secondary non-tertiary graduates' (OECD 2003: 159). Consciously or unconsciously those of us who participate in higher education are acquiring a `positional' good which confers private benefit and grants us public status. The effect of the massification of higher education has resulted in greater demands for all to have access to higher education and has also resulted in a reduction in the perceived value of, for example, an

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undergraduate qualification. There has been a resultant rush for some to seek higher level qualifications in order to retain their positional advantage (Scott 2000: 195), and this is, as described by Robertson (2000: 84), leading to `credential saturation of the labour market'. Having a positional advantage implies that what you possess is scarce and therefore valued by society. Ironically the smaller number of people with higher educational credentials the more valued these are both in financial and status terms (Jonathan 2001: 38) and the more people who possess higher educational credentials results in a decrease in their positional good but the cost of provision rises (Meek 2000: 34).

In my view we need to explore whether there is a relationship between higher education and members of society who are unable to or do not desire to participate in higher education. Questions, such as whether higher education has any role to play in the lives of those who fall outside the taxation net and therefore do not contribute to its maintenance or whether its reach extends to those members of society who do not wish to attend higher education, need to be debated. The answers to these questions may lie in what we mean exactly when we say that higher education is a public good. Maybe it is necessary from time to time to go back to basics and ask fundamental questions in respect of, for example, who is the `public' and what is the `good'.

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Higher education as a public good

The idea of higher education as a public good is linked to the notion that without state intervention the market would fail to provide adequate provision for all citizens (Hufner 2003: 340). This would result in a reduced number of people being able to make a contribution to society, in particular an economic contribution, and hence society as a whole would suffer. However, conceptualizing higher education, or what is now more frequently presented in the guise of lifelong learning, as having a dual role in the development of human capital and the promotion of social justice (Walters and Watters 2001: 471) requires that we consider the `public' as including all citizens regardless of whether or not they currently wish to or can participate. Defining the `public' to include everybody might imply that all have a say in the degree of `private' benefit which may be accrued at either an individual or an organizational level and opens up the possibility of the `good' aspect of higher education being defined by all regardless of their position in society.

One might argue that conceptualizing higher education as having a dual role of promoting economic well-being and social justice justifies its treatment as a public good. However, as noted earlier, higher education confers private benefits on both individual students and also potentially the organizations they work for. Jonathan (2001) expresses concern that an increasing emphasis on the contribution that higher education makes to economic well-being is promoting `heightened individualism' and `increased social stratification' (Jonathan 2001: 28). If all members of society are not able to or do not wish to participate in higher education then there is, I believe, a need to open up a debate on the implications of this. To continue to publicly fund higher

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education on the basis that all members of society ultimately benefit, either directly or indirectly, requires some effort to be made to ensure that the promotion of economic prosperity and social justice for all is nurtured among participants of higher education.

The purported failure of the higher education system to deliver on expectations with regard to social justice and equity have been deemed to be either `failure in the process of implementation' by the education system or `inherent inadequacies in its intended beneficiaries' (Jonathan 1997: 63). In short either the education system is at fault or some of society's citizens are somehow deficient.

An increasing tendency to position higher education as a market needing to respond to the needs of `consumers' is resulting in `the compression of intrinsic educational goals to extrinsic market performance indicators' (Gibbs 2001: 87). Presenting higher education as not living up to its dual mandate of delivering on economic development *and* social justice results in an undermining of trust in the education system, and calls for reform and greater efficiency are made (Gibbs 2001).

It is perhaps easy to blame the education system for failure to produce economic or social justice returns. However, decisions are not made by systems, but by individuals and groups within any system. The influencers and decision-makers are in many cases those who have privately benefited from higher education. An education system which is promoting individualization of society with an emphasis on `getting ahead' on an individual basis requires that we evaluate why this is allowed to happen. To avoid looking at issues of power and influence is to deny that ultimately decisions within society are made by individuals or groups. Brown *et al.* (1997) note that:

> it is very difficult, if not impossible, to demonstrate a causal relationship between education and economic productivity. There are two related reasons for this. Firstly, the link between education and productivity is mediated by

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> issues of power most clearly seen in the phenomenon of credential inflation. And secondly, changes in the demand for skill are as much a social as a technical issue, subject to vested interest and social conflict.
>
> (Brown *et al.* 1997: 9)

This is not to say, as has been outlined by Jonathan (2001: 26) that `public = good' and `private = bad'. However, society is not a level playing pitch for all its members. Perhaps the concern over the `private' benefit aspect of higher education is that not all have an equal opportunity to define what is an appropriate private benefit, and those who attain private benefits are not bound to contribute to society beyond their legal obligations. In an ideal world all members of society would be able to articulate their views on higher education as a public good, and contribute to how this `good' was defined and enacted. As this is not the case, maybe a more promising area to explore is the role of higher education in *realizing the public good* as against accepting per se that higher education is *a public good*.

The role of higher education in shaping and realizing the public good

When we speak of the dual role of higher education in promoting economic development and social justice there is a tendency to focus, rightly some might argue, on ensuring that the `disadvantaged' are encouraged to participate fully in society, i.e. through the attainment of employment and exercising their duties as responsible citizens, for example through voting in elections. I would argue that there is not enough importance attached to the role of higher education in the lives of students who through their participation in higher education will help define the type of society we live in. To keep alive `our optimism' in the `socially transformative' potential of higher education (Jonathan 2001: 36), higher education has to seek to avoid:

> Our deep-rooted tendency to think of persons first and foremost atomistically. Rather we need to regard persons as members of groups from the start, their very being and identity

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> constituted by such membership and to conceive autonomy in interpersonal rather than intra- personal terms.
>
> (Smith 1997: 127)

The competitive entry system of Irish higher education places a premium on attracting second-level students with the highest marks. This competitive system already influences young adults to operate in society as autonomous and competitive individuals prior to their ever setting foot in a higher level educational institution. The conflict between meeting the good of *all* citizens whilst also meeting the needs of *each* citizen brings into conflict the dual role of higher education in promoting economic well-being and social justice. The meritocratic system potentially replicates existing social structures (Jonathan 2001). Brown *et al.* (1997: 9) note that `several theorists have hypothesized that the purpose of credentials is to screen personalities as much as cognitive achievement'.

It could be argued that it is unrealistic and unfair to deny students entry on the basis of merit and that each student is entitled to access their share of education as a `public good'. However, higher education through its socialization of students, could be an important place where the seeds for forming and realizing the public good are sown (Jonathan 2001). The distinction between higher education as a public good versus higher education realizing the public good, it can be argued, might represent merely a playing with semantics. However, if one goes back to the dual role of higher education as supporting economic development and social justice one places responsibilities on higher education in respect of its role in knowledge production and dissemination either through its research or teaching functions. Obligations are placed on higher education not just to be responsible for the production of knowledge and the education of students but also critically that this knowledge production and education

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of students is situated in the context of conferring benefit not only on individuals but also on society. In short higher education is not of itself a public good unless its efforts are directed to realizing the public good.

Jonathan (2001) has attempted to move away from the public/private good debate, as she rightly points out that higher education confers both public and private benefits, and the relationship between these is complex. Instead she has tried to articulate higher education as a `social practice' and therefore a `social good' arguing that:

> We are each affected by the education, or lack of it, of others: this we experience collectively. But we are each also powerfully – and differentially – affected by our own education, or lack of it: this we experience privately. This together with other unique features of education as a social practice make this `good' *neither `public' nor `private' but social*. (author's italics).
>
> (Jonathan 2001: 31)

If higher education has a role in shaping and realizing the public good, and if we accept also that it is essentially a social practice with citizens connected either consciously or unconsciously in a relationship which ascribes benefits and/or losses to varying degrees, then might not higher education have a responsibility to at least raise to a conscious level in society the nature of these benefits and losses to individuals, groups and society in general. A particular concern is that not only those who are excluded from the `bonds of common citizenship' but that those at the `top can exclude themselves from these bonds and thereby fail to acknowledge the equal worth of their fellow citizens' (Martin 2003: 572).

Higher education and the `educated' student

Higher education institutions are `producing citizens and this means we must ask what a good citizen of the present day should know' (Nussbaum 1997: 8). Equally we

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should ask what higher education should be `teaching' citizens in the broadest sense of the word. Some would argue that viewing higher education as a business results in higher education shifting its focus to the economic success of its students and that this focus will delineate concerns that are outside of this (Gumport in Hodges Persell and Wenglinsky 2004: 337-338).

Conceptualizing student identity beyond their role as a worker, that is, as a member of a family, community and society, implies providing students with an education that goes beyond an instrumental view of it. This instrumental view of education, it has been argued, largely views education as `valued more for its vocational function in contributing to individual careers or national productivity rather than its intrinsic value' (Blackmore 2001: 354). For students, is `accumulating material goods the essence of the good life' (Giroux 2001: 6), and will they be given other objectives for democracy other than profit making?

The language of higher education has become industrialized (Coffield and Williamson 1997). The traditional academic interpretation of higher education is now in competition with the new notion of competence linked to the workplace. The traditional academic interpretation of competence focuses more on learning as a process rather than a product (Barnett 1997a: 30-31). Providing students with an educational experience which is less about the journey and more about the destination or now more commonly termed the `learning outcome', may result in, to use a business term, `opportunity costs' for students and society.

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The state of higher education in the new millennium

Higher education as a knowledge producer: from centre stage to chorus line

According to Scott (2000), in the twentieth century the university was possibly the leading knowledge-producing institution. However, with the entry of other knowledge producers, notably from private sector industry, today higher education is one among many knowledge producers. The massification of higher education has resulted in an increased number of graduates:

> who subsequently become competent to pass judgement on university research and who belong to organisations which might do the job just as well. Universities are coming to recognise that they are now only one type of player, albeit a major one, in a vastly expanded knowledge production process.
>
> (Gibbons *et al.* 1994: 11)

So the number of knowledge producers and the number of people able to judge knowledge has increased. Higher education had been hitherto comfortably dressed in its dual role as a producer of knowledge and a producer of knowledgeability (Scott 2000): secure that it could supply society with rational and scientifically based knowledge and an appropriate number of well qualified citizens. However, what no knowledge producer, including the university, can guarantee to society is that all knowledge produced will bring benefit to society, either locally or globally. Even the most rational and scientifically sound knowledge has resulted in negative consequences for society, such as providing weapons for war, adverse environmental changes, etc. So arguments based on guarding higher education as a public good based on the possibility that it may produce some form of almost higher order knowledge which cannot be produced elsewhere and which will generate `progress' fail unless higher education accepts some responsibility arising from the

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consequences of the application of knowledge. To argue that the university is detached from society in its production of knowledge is to deny that academic institutions are socially constructed and that all knowledge production involves some form of vested interest, even if it is simply an individual academic wishing to engage in the production of knowledge for personal development or satisfaction. The production of knowledge is, I would argue, purposive, and higher education cannot pretend that by some accident outside its control the end result of its knowledge has been misused. It may not be possible for higher education to prevent the negative impact on society of knowledge or the uses made of knowledge. It can however come out from `under the covers' and communicate its beliefs on knowledge production and application. Barnett wryly comments that the university wants `to claim that its hard-won knowledge is value-free and yet not value-less' and that so-called value-free knowledge makes the university a `prey for any purpose' (Barnett 2000: 25). Even within higher education there may not be agreement on the production of knowledge, but then higher education is arguably not about agreement but about provoking contestation and supporting societies locally and globally to form their views on the sort of society and world we want to live in.

In Ireland in the 1960s the potential contribution of higher education through the supply of a qualified and skilled workforce began to gain prominence and the attention of government (White 2001). Having a supply of well-qualified employees is one of the reasons often cited for Ireland's economic success and the so-called `Celtic Tiger'. Industry Advisory Groups (such as the Expert Group on Future Skills set up by the Irish government to examine and advise on the skill requirements of industry) stress the importance of continued upskilling of the Irish workforce for continued economic development (Report of the Expert Group on Future Skills 2003).

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A report commissioned by Irish government from the Enterprise Strategy Group (July 2004) outlined three critical areas of focus for higher education: to be adaptive and flexible in the production of high quality graduates, the upskilling of the workforce, and the expansion of the workforce via a skills-based immigration strategy. In a footnote the Report noted that it was focusing on the `economic role of the educational system, rather than on its cultural and social roles' (Enterprise Strategy Group 2004: 73). The Report also made recommendations in respect of reducing the current drop-out rate of 17% at second level education as this is a `disadvantage not only for the students but also the economy' (Enterprise Strategy Group 2004: 77). The fact that graduates are equipped to take up employment or potential students are better supported to take up employment could not be disagreed with. While academia may be nervous of this creeping vocationalism in higher education it can be argued that:

> Academic identity is particularly threatened by work-based learning, when academic knowledge has to be tested in the workplace and where it can be made to look vulnerable and non-viable. In such a scenario, academics find their academic and professional identities challenged. Their perceived capacity to be useful is reduced when supervising a work-based student who is often more in command of the knowledge environment of work than an academic can ever hope to be.
>
> (Boud and Symes 2000: 25)

The increasing calls by employers that students be equipped with skills for the workplace and that higher education engage with the workplace through the provision of work-based or workplaced learning programmes may pose a threat to the academic world in respect of challenging the fitness of higher education to produce workers that can help industry to effectively compete. Also, as described by Boud and Symes (2000), attempts to integrate academic knowledge with the needs of the workplace opens academic knowledge up to external scrutiny by other knowledge producers. If higher education is a public good and, as such, desires protection from market forces

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then it will have to be open to the public -- including employers -- asking that it addresses the needs of employers and their employees. While higher education might feel uncomfortable with the increasing vocational emphasis placed on the education system, as society develops it is not unreasonable that higher education might also be expected to evolve. Viewing higher education as a public good facilitates higher educational institutions being able to argue they simply do what the public asks of them without ever having to define who exactly is included or excluded within the definition of `the public'. If higher education is conceptualized as shaping and influencing the public good then higher education may have a different role to play in society, and may be better placed to argue that it has to look at the education of students as being the education of citizens.

Marginson describes the development of mass higher education in Australia during the period 1955-1990, with the university `seen as a principal tool of modern nation-building' wherein: `rationality of government was grounded in the notion of ``investment in human capital'', whereby the population was understood as a national resource to be harboured and developed' (Marginson 2002: 411)

Today in Australia, and shared by many other countries, universities are confronting many challenges including a `globalising university environment', a reduction in government commitment to the nation-building role of universities articulated in a weakening resource base, and `the crisis of academic identity brought about by the ``corporatisation'' of internal university systems and cultures' (Marginson 2002: 412).

One response is for universities leaders to seek to have their university privatized (Marginson and Considine 2000: 245). Privatization might have some appeal to the public. For some it might reduce their taxation burden and for other individuals and

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organizations there might be an increase in their influence over the direction of higher education. Equally universities could focus on research or teaching that was attractive to their university. However, if higher education has a role in forming and realizing the `public good', and if the `public' includes everybody in society, handing over higher education either to academia or to a select number of private funders removes higher education from the realm of the `public' and indeed necessarily from being considered a `good'. If higher education goes down the road of increasing private sector funding `their bedrock constituency' may `become confined to their employees' (Marginson and Considine 2000: 245).

The role of higher education: lost in a maze

The role of higher education seems to be lost in some perpetual `crisis'. The 1960s brought a crisis of `governance' arising from student unrest and challenge to the:

> Elitist functions of the university based upon the myths of `pure inquiry' and `objective knowledge' which operated, ideologically, to screen out difficult cultural and gender values that determine both what counts as knowledge and legitimate ways of pursuing it.
>
> (Peters 2004: 67)

Concerns about the decline of the humanities in the 1970s and the rise in science and technology brought another `crisis'. In the 1980s and 1990s issues like the funding of higher education, the rise of corporate manageralism in higher education, demands to align higher education with the development of human capital brought new `crises' to higher education.

In Ireland in the new millennium the issue of funding of higher education and the continuance of free higher level education has been `floated' and withdrawn. It may be that this `floating' was a test of public reaction. A review of the Irish higher education system by the OECD was published in September 2004. Part of the OECD's

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brief was to report on investment and financing of higher education in Ireland. An article by the Education Editor of the *Irish Times* (Flynn 2004) indicated that while the Minister for Education has signalled that the return of fees was not going to be considered in the `foreseeable future' the OECD report was planning to highlight the funding crisis facing higher education in Ireland and recommend changes `to make the third level sector less dependent on the Exchequer, including closer links with business and industry' (Flynn 2004). When the Report was issued in September 2004 its recommendations included `that subject to means testing, fees for undergraduate study be re-introduced and the ``Free Fees'' policy withdrawn'. If fees were re-introduced the OECD Report (2004) recommended that the state should not reduce its subvention to higher education institutions as the fees generated would `represent a real and tangible increase in HEI's resources' (OECD 2004: 59). The report also recommended that, in respect of part-time students, changes be made to the higher education fees system to equalize treatment of full-time and part-time students (part-time students in Ireland currently pay fees).

I believe that unless the role of higher education is openly debated, and in particular its role in shaping and realizing the public good, then higher education may, in attempting to resolve funding issues, find itself walking a tightrope trying to balance the needs of funders with those of the wider public. Some are predicting that an era of increasing globalization of markets will result in individual countries no longer being `the primary site of economic management and integration'. `Processes of globalization in economic organization, communications and policy regimes' will result in a `retreat of the state from provider to regulator' and the `state will no longer be the sole financier of knowledge' (Delanty 2001: 103).

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It seems that higher education cannot make up its mind what it wants or wants to be: sufficient funds to go about its business or autonomy to raise its own finances? (See Barnett 2003: 172.) Competition among higher education institutions for students both in terms of quantity and quality of students now also includes higher educational institutions competing to attract international students. In Ireland higher education institutions seek to be the `first preference' of second level students when these students make their applications for a higher education place through the Central Applications Office. The publication of the results of students' `first preference' creates an informal league table not just for programmes, but also of institutions. Higher education institutions compete also to gain government or EU research funding and also to attract private investment or donations.

In the wake of increasing competition and pressure on the financing of higher education, fund raising and the marketing of higher education institutions to attract students and research funding are not surprising initiatives on the part of higher education institutions in Ireland. Publicly funded institutions now also compete with private sector providers and are under increasing pressure to demonstrate value for money. New measurements of accountability via the listing of learning outcomes for programmes and quality audits is bringing internal and external accountability to the door of individual academics and their Departments/Schools.

In my view issues such as concerns over competition, funding, accountability and new manageralism while impacting on university life, and in many ways a reality of a consumer-orientated society, are forces upon which Irish universities are unlikely to be able to turn back the clock. While causing institutional discomfort these developments perhaps are appealing distractions for higher education to concern itself

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with. There are much bigger challenges to be faced which require significant institutional reform in order to effect the albeit complex and twin role of contributing to economic development *and* social justice. Higher education institutions committed to shaping and realizing the public good through giving equal status to their dual role would need to undertake more radical institutional reform and be willing institutionally to present to the public their vision of their place in society.

Higher education: confronting its `demons'

Has higher education lost the plot? Forever navel gazing around concerns about its role, searching for answers on what counts as knowledge, murmuring about creeping manageralism, losing sleep over money troubles, worrying over issues surrounding accountability and generally feeling misunderstood and misrepresented. These are what I would call the `demons' of higher education in the new millennium. Focusing on all or any of these will not, I believe, give higher education the support or respect of society in the new millennium. The solution to the plight of higher education does not lie within higher education. Simply being a higher education institution does not measure up to a `public good' and will not inspire popular support.

If higher education has a role in shaping and realizing the public good, and if this is achieved via enhancing economic development and greater social justice then higher education needs to look outside the academic world for its *raison d'être.* Three recent reports in Ireland highlight issues related to economic development and social justice.

The first is a study undertaken by the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD) 2003 entitled *Who Learns at Work? A Study of Learners in the Republic of Ireland.* This study highlighted the presence of `privileged' and `less privileged' groups in the workplace. The privileged groups are comprised of the

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relatively younger, better educated, of higher social status employees receiving greater access to company training than the `less privileged' employees who hold lower level occupations (CIPD 2003: 18-20). The second report I want to refer to briefly mention is the United Nations *Human Development Report* (2004). The editorial of the *Irish Times* of 16 July 2004 commenting on this Report and Ireland's 16th position out of 17 states on the human poverty index notes `Ireland is an unequal society in which many remain socially excluded'. The third report, the report of the Enterprise Strategy Group July 2004, *Ahead of the Curve: Ireland's Place in the Global Economy*, emphasizes the importance of ensuring our supply of a suitably skilled workforce.

I mention these reports to illustrate that within them they contain information on important economic and social justice issues confronting Ireland. For example, issues such as equal opportunities for all in the workplace to access education and training, the gap between rich and poor in Ireland, and in order to remain competitive, the country's need to ensure an adequate supply of highly skilled graduates and the constant upskilling of those already in employment. If higher education is looking to `find itself' then it needs to look outside the academy. I am not suggesting that the academy alone can solve the economic development and social justice challenges that are facing society. However, it can and should be helping citizens explore options in respect of the type of world we all live in. Higher education is unique in that it has the potential to be a place where economic and social issues can be introduced and debated *together*, rather than being treated as separate subjects to be discussed in different reports. This approach might present students with insights into what shapes the world we live in.

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Students, society and higher education

Students as citizens in the new millennium

In an era of human capital theory, developing students to take their place in society equipped with the appropriate competencies including the so-called appropriate `soft skills' of leadership, team-playing, communication skills, etc. is becoming part of industry's claims on higher education. Higher education is still to trying to come to terms with the notion of a greater emphasis being placed on the application of knowledge. Higher education and industry both have reservations about each other. Although debates within higher education as to what counts as knowledge have opened out in recent years (see for example Gibbons *et al.* (1994) and Scott (2000)) the conflicts which arise between the needs of the economy and the needs of higher education institutions are bound to come to a head when higher education situates itself within a still limited discourse of arguments around what counts as knowledge.

Industry and higher education are both part of modern society. Both should play an important part in the lives of citizens. However, when one splits the individual into two separate roles of student and employee, one discounts or ignores that a person's identity is comprised of a number of roles in society. In the case of education we have a choice in respect of the:

> kinds of morality which underpin versions of (higher) education. On the one hand a `thick morality' is grounded in notions of the common good as the ethical basis for policy and practice; while a `thin morality' is grounded in competitive individualism and hierarchical divisions. Put another way would be to ask whether the purpose of higher education holds ethical values to be central, as much as the development of knowledge and skills?
>
> (Walker and Nixon 2004: 5)

Arguments for a liberal education might suggest that we are talking about the

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protection of the study of some dying subjects, with academics racing to protect their particular patch of the academic world. The idea of a liberal education is more about:

> An education that is `liberal' in that it liberates the mind from the bondage of habit and custom, producing people who can function with sensitivity and alertness as citizens of the world. That is what Seneca means by the cultivation of humanity.
>
> (Nussbaum 1997: 8)

Nussbaum (1997) has identified three capacities for the cultivation of humanity. First, to be able to examine, question, justify one's own life and traditions because `democracy needs citizens who can think for themselves rather than simply deferring to authority' and `who can reason together about their choices rather than just trading claims and counterclaims'. Second, to cultivate a sense that we do not just belong either to our local area or country but that we are connected to `all other human beings by ties of recognition and concern'. Third, that we cultivate an ability to place ourselves in another's life and see things from their perspective (Nussbaum 1997: 9-11).

Cultivating humanity might seem like some utopian concept. If one were to take a more utilitarian perspective on cultivating humanity what employer would not like employees to have the ability to look beyond their own habits and beliefs. A society intent on cultivating humanity is not without risk for individuals, organizations and society. There may be `winners and losers'. Is society ready to cultivate humanity? If the answer is no then maybe we need to ask or at least be able to ask why not? Davis (1998) speaks about students being allowed to exercise choice and to act as free agents. While today we speak of higher education providing students with greater choice and flexibility, the pity is that this choice is limited to subject and delivery option choices and not to giving our student-citizens choices in respect of the kind of

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society we work and live in.

No limits on learning: higher education for citizens of the world

In the words of Barnett:

> If higher education is to be in any form of business, it has to be in the highest forms of human development. If education is an intentional set of processes aimed at producing worthwhile forms of human development, higher education has to be in the business of producing the most advanced forms of human development. A higher education designed to bring about critical persons capable of working towards a learning society can be no other.
>
> (Barnett 1997b: 162)

Barnett proposes that higher education seek to replace the idea of developing students critical thinking with its focus on knowledge, and instead to develop `critical being'. Critical being focuses criticality in three domains, i.e. knowledge, self and the world. I suppose what Barnett is calling for is a more embracing higher education for students which attaches importance to the role of critical reason, self-reflection and critical action. Barnett (1997b) suggests that developing a curriculum for critical being presents challenges and risks for academics. Such a curriculum would seek to invoke the highest level of criticality, i.e. `transformatory critique' which would impact on the three domains of criticality, i.e. knowledge, self and world via knowledge critique, reconstruction of self and critique in action (collective reconstruction of world). This contrasts with the lowest level of criticality, i.e. critical skills which impact on the three domains of criticality in a much more limited way, promoting discipline-specific

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critical thinking skills (knowledge), self-monitoring to given standards and norms (self) and problem-solving (means-end instrumentalism) (world) (Barnett 1997b: 103). In essence Barnett wants higher education to introduce students to the potential of knowledge, self and the world, to a bigger landscape beyond the immediate acquisition of a piece of knowledge, skill or end result.

Developing a curriculum for critical being would present academics and students with challenges. For academics `setting up an educational framework in which students can make their *own* (author's italics) structured explorations, testing their ideas in the critical company of each other' may mean that `pedagogical roles and relationships become uncertain and necessarily invite risk into their proceedings' (Barnett 1997b: 110). For students viewing their education beyond their passing of examinations or gaining that prized credential may initially challenge their perception that education is a means to individual ends.

We cannot deny that most students go to higher education, particularly at undergraduate level, with a view to obtaining employment and in particular `good' employment. However, to create higher education institutions where students `develop their critical faculties' and are encouraged `not only to participate in the production of knowledge but to believe, too, that if they want to, they can change things' (Barr 2002: 322) is to recognize the potential of higher education to shape and realize the good of all citizens. If we want to remain hopeful of the transformatory potential of higher education then government, industry, higher education institutions, society and individuals have to be willing to put the theory into practice. The closer alignment between higher education and industry has the potential to open up possibilities of not just demanding but of realizing `a correspondence between citizens

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of civil society and citizenship in organizational workplaces' (Casey 2003: 632).

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Reconceptualizing the role of higher education

for the education of citizens

What then of the role of higher education as comprising institutions dedicated to shaping and realizing the public good as against simply being presumed to be `a public good'. What would such institutions look like?

First, higher education institutions need leaders appointed based on their commitment to a higher education system dedicated to realizing the good of *all*. Too often when new appointments to higher education institutions are made much is made of the leader's individual achievements in the area of research or their track record in generating income. Selecting higher education leaders based on their ability to generate income is the easy option. Selecting higher education leaders for their ability to harness the potential of their institution to shape and realize the public good, a public good which does not delineate the `public' by virtue of their attendance at higher education or the `good' based on the success of their students, but seeks to influence wider socio-economic issues, is a far more challenging and contentious objective.

Second, comes the integration of economic and social justice issues into academic life, not through the narrowly focused `access' offices and programmes wherein a tiny number of academics and administrators are deployed as a `sideline' activity of their higher education institution, nor by the delivery of training programmes for industry in an atmosphere of `political' correctness with such activity undertaken for political and economic reasons but still viewed as not really worthy of a place in academia. What is needed is a serious attempt to mainstream economic and social well-being issues into the everyday life of higher education institutions that is reflected in the

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culture of higher education institutions and integrated into everyday teaching and research.

Third, I believe that the world needs a place and a space where the direction of human development can be contested. Higher education is unique as a public good in that it does confer private benefit. Having a positional advantage in society should open up choices for ourselves, and, if we believe in the promotion of social justice, for others. Having a positional advantage in society gives citizens individual power and influence. Higher education can have a role at least in opening up to citizens the possibility that they too have influence and choice as to how the development of society progresses. If higher education wants to be a serious player in realizing the public good it has to go beyond conceptualizing its role in the pursuit of social justice simply as the implementation of initiatives for the disadvantaged student. Instead it needs to focus not just on the preparation of graduates for employment but also on the role that graduates have as citizens in society. It is the `advantaged' students who may ultimately hold the key to realizing not just economic prosperity but also influencing the development of a more equitable society. Ignoring their role in shaping society will only replicate existing social structures, and ironically, may also result in all of us living in a world which is less successful, both economically and socially.

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