

Valuing the Civic Role of University Education in an Age of Competition and Rapid Change



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1 Introduction

In recent decades the discourse about higher education (HE) has been dominated by an instrumentalist view that emphasized the labour market benefits for graduates and the net (social) returns to tax payers for the public funding of HE (Psacharopoulos and Patrinos 2010). Nonetheless, HE's contribution to students' development and life is much broader than that through several non-market benefits to graduates, including improved health, improved education prospects for children, and greater longevity (see McMahon 2009). Furthermore, the effects of HE are visible in many civic dimensions, such as strengthened citizenship and civic mindedness and participation in democratic institutions. Thus, in this chapter, we discuss the significance of the civic contribution of HE beyond a narrow version of economic effects and on education practices that foster students' civic mindedness and civic engagement.

2 Beyond a Narrow Understanding of the Economic Benefits of Higher Education

The development of human capital theory in the mid-twentieth century anchored education as a central tenet of individual and social wealth and contributed to a massive increase in HE worldwide. Though the average private return to HE continued to be very attractive, there is significant evidence of a growing differen-

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tiation among groups of graduates and of the unequal benefits to each of them (Oreopoulos and Petronijevic 2013). The acceleration of technological change is also having an impact on the relevance of existing stocks and profiles of human capital (Aoun 2017), which will also affect qualified workers and selective occupations (and not only low-skilled workers). This has stimulated increasing debate about the skills and competencies that HE should develop in students. If we add to these trends the impact of the great recession and the challenging political and social context that has been emerging in many countries over recent years, the need to rethink the benefits of HE more broadly through the so-called nonmonetary benefits becomes more apparent (McMahon 2009).

Both the developments in the labour market and the aforementioned challenges of social cohesion and political fragmentation emphasise the importance of the role of HE shaping civic beliefs and attitudes. The relationship between education and civic behaviour is not straightforward. Education increases income and therefore raises the opportunity cost of civic activities vis-à-vis productive ones. Thus, greater investments in education increase the returns in the labour market and create a lower incentive for civic activity. However, there is also an educational impact on developing cultural attitudes and the link between the educational system and values. Each of these forces will differ according to the institution attended, the field of study or type of degree, since each of these dimensions will entail different educational experiences and different opportunities for graduates in the labour market.

Generally speaking, education's impact on citizenship has quantitative and qualitative aspects. On the one hand, education encourages broader participation by increasing interest and knowledge of civic issues. On the other hand, education enhances the quality of civic participation by equipping people with cognitive skills that enable their capacity to play a more critical and effective role. There is strong empirical evidence between education and a variety of social outcomes associated with civic values, including a greater likelihood to join organizations and participate in community activities (Glaeser et al. 2007). Although the effects may correlate with other factors, such as family and social background, they are sufficiently strong even when controlling for that.

One of the areas being studied in social and civic benefits of education refers to political participation and engagement. The impact of education on voting behaviour is one of the best documented aspects in political behaviour, with various recent studies showing that more educated individuals are more likely to vote (Dee 2004; Milligan et al. 2004). Education reduces the costs of certain forms of civic engagement and increases the perceived benefits of civic engagement. More educated individuals are more likely to register to vote, to follow political campaigns and political affairs, to attend political meetings, to volunteer for community issues or to attend community meetings. Moreover, they also tend to have a more favourable judgement about politics, its relevance, and the value of involvement in the political process, that may contribute to a better polity. HE contributes to promoting engaged and alert citizenship. This is referred to as critical citizens (Norris 2010), i.e., individuals who support and value democratic ideals but present at the same time significant levels of dissatisfaction with the performance of the political system.

Civic virtues may transcend political participation and refer to greater trust in institutions or others or the willingness to accept and tolerate diversity (Borgonovi 2012). Trust and tolerance are attitudes or ways of being that have consequences on social cohesion (Glaeser et al. 2007). More open, diverse, and tolerant societies have a greater capacity for innovation and entrepreneurship as tolerance can manifest itself in the creation of bonds of trust, either interpersonal or in the institutions themselves.

Although the accumulation of evidence about a strong and positive relationship between HE and civic behaviour is important, it is even more relevant to understand the mechanisms by which that link operates. That is getting inside the so-called black-box of HE. There is some exploratory evidence that certain types of skills and disciplines seem to strongly correlate with political participation more than others (Hillygus 2005). However, we do not know how comparable those individuals were regarding their characteristics and preferences and to what extent individuals that chose certain fields are different in their social and political attitudes and values. Moreover, it is relevant to discuss how much those individuals had comparable experiences in HE (the type of education, content, learning methods) and the extent to which differences in those experiences could be relevant in shaping their political values and engagement.

3 Revaluing the Civic Role of University Education

We can explore the civic role of HE through two main approaches. The capabilities approach (Sen 1999) submits that freedom to achieve wellbeing, which is of primary moral importance, is to be understood in terms of people's capabilities which are real opportunities to do and to be what they reason to value. Nussbaum (2010) suggests that the capabilities that are crucial for the internal health of democracies are critical thinking, global citizenship dispositions, and empathetic understanding of human experiences, and it is education's task to equip students with these capabilities. We can also consider the civic effects of HE through the lens of normative democratic theory, especially regarding what is reasonable to expect from universities in guiding the design or development of democratic institutions. As well as the democratic practices within different social institutions, including universities (Biesta 2010). At the same time, educating future legislators, since a college degree is one advantage of getting elected to a legislative body (Hillygus 2005). The question here is how universities can help develop or foster democratic practices in their societies or help combat illiberal democratic practices. Both the capabilities approach and normative democratic theory are closely related in the context of education of students for civic mindedness and participation in democratic institutions. While the civic role of universities should, in principle, encompass all areas of operations, we are particularly interested in how that role can be better fulfilled through the function of education. That is, by strengthening student civic engagement and civic-mindedness.

Elite HE with small class cohorts undoubtedly provides better conditions for impairing civic values while nurturing students' individuality and autonomy in civic

expression. In mass HE, the tendency is towards the standardization of education provision which lends itself better to indoctrination rather than individuality in civic mindedness (McFarlane 2017). Yet, standardized practices towards educating civically minded students, such as variations of mandatory civic courses, seem to be counterproductive to those objectives. Nonetheless, there are several examples of good practices in several networks and university initiatives that constitute the “global engaged higher education” movement (Watson et al. 2011). Major examples include the Talloires Network, an international association of over 400 universities committed to strengthening the civic roles and social responsibilities of higher education (Watson et al. 2011); and the Campus Compact, an organization based in the U.S. dedicated to promoting civic purposes of higher education (Battistoni 2017). The most vocal proponent of education for democracy and diversity in Europe has been the Council of Europe. Other national or regional networks have emerged over the past two decades in the United Kingdom, Ireland, Australia, South Africa, and the Arab world.

The enactment of civic mission through education is by no means uncontested. It is intertwined with the persistent debate about what should be taught and to what purpose. Looking at the aim of education serving democracy by strengthening civic mindedness in students, there are notable differences between the classical and progressive traditions (for an excellent review see Sant 2019). The classical tradition, i.e., the tradition of liberal learning, is in favour of education serving democracy but in a way that is disengaged from current life (Oakshott 1989). Students are asked to delve deep into classical works of world civilizations and explore the ways of knowing, critically examine, and deliberate about democratic traditions and its core themes. Including conceptions of liberty, theories of democracy, and principles of distributive justice. In contrast, progressive educational tradition argues in favour of appraising the knowledge of the past for its relevance to solving the social problems of present times. The progressive educationalists advocate for the revision of curricula in line with critical, deliberative, and action-centred pedagogies. In a milder variation of progressive education, teachers are asked to help students develop civic mindedness and civic agency in any course, regardless of discipline, by introducing meaningful topics and activities that make connections to the real world (Boyte 2008).

The globally engaged university movement follows both educational traditions. The trend has not been to offer specific civic education courses in HE, but instead to offer courses that purposefully include civic competence-building to balance the disciplinary courses (Zgaga 2016). Moreover, students are involved in political and civic deliberations, contestations, and actions on campus (Biesta 2010). Students are also guided into co-curricular and extracurricular activities, such as community volunteering, paid internships, student leadership, and other types of volunteer or paid activities in the domain of public service or community engagement (Cress et al. 2013). These public service activities can be directed to communities outside the campus, as well as directly serve university communities. Student service to their university community is considered highly impactful for overall positive student experience and wellbeing (Kuh 2008). Furthermore, by providing opportunities for

civic engagement on campus, universities can significantly enhance students' civic agency (Boyte 2008). Regardless of the students' motivations to engage in public service roles—be that altruistic or CV-building—students inevitably gain some civic mindedness through exposure to issues and other civic minded individuals.

Finally, the informal (or incidental) learning for civic mindedness is associated with the notion of universities as 'sites of citizenship' (Bergan 2004). Universities transmit values and attitudes through the ways of doing and through issues to which they give more or less attention (Klemenčič 2010). One such value is enabling student governments as a distinct form of political institutions within universities that organize, aggregate, and represent student interests (Klemenčič 2020). Another, more contested, is acceptance of (non-violent) student activism as a form of political expression. Yet, the education practices at universities have shifted from democratic principles of governance into more corporate models that undermine the civic roles of students through representation, and pay more attention to individual student rights. Such changes undermine the notions of universities as sites of citizenship and civic engagement and deprive students of civic opportunities that would strengthen their civic mindedness, and dispositions for (university) citizenship and civic engagement.

4 Concluding Remarks

Higher education is facing important challenges regarding its societal role. For many decades, the sector's relentless expansion was largely supported by the belief in the income and employment benefits of a degree. Universities were assessed regarding their contribution to that goal. Nonetheless, rapid and substantial changes in the labour market, and important crises and tensions in many countries (amplified by the current pandemic), have underlined the need to consider the contribution of HE to individuals and society more broadly. Particularly in times of increasing social change and tensions, it has become even more important to reflect on the role of HE in forging civic-mindedness among its students, as well as the type of education and skills that should be more relevant for the development of HE.

Practices to foster civic mindedness in HE students are diverse and demonstrate a commitment to experiential learning that is not confined to classrooms but can take place anywhere on campus and in engagement with community partners. These practices also express the conception of students as partners in knowledge generation and as full members, indeed university citizens, contributing to university communities. As we have tried to argue, promoting civic mindedness should be regarded less as an additional element in education that can be promoted in a standard way, but rather as something that pervades the missions and governance of the institution, which, therefore, needs to be integrated and adapted to the individual profile and circumstances of the institution. This is especially relevant given the growing stratification/differentiation in many HE systems. Meaning that the type of education that students receive can be very different.

With the growing erosion of trust and social bonds (Pharr and Putnam 2000), and with growing political polarization, there are very few social institutions left with the capacity and vitality of HE to nurture civic values and promote critical citizenry. This needs to be addressed in the framework of HE's specificity and mission and the diversity of students they serve, namely the type of degree, the field, or other major characteristics of the student body. Universities should also strive to understand their impact effects through students' civic engagement and the extent to which innovative approaches can strengthen the nexus between HE and civic virtues. This will require universities to articulate a long-term strategy that places multidimensional social development at the core of its mission.

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