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Abstract

Higher education (HE) is usually seen as serving the public good, especially when funded directly by the state, and because of potential social effects such as a reduction in inequality and an increase in social mobility. Public support for higher education is conditional; however, on its capacity, capability and willingness to educate citizens, and to create and disseminate knowledge. But what is the public good and what defines it? Recent years have seen many governments adopt the format of a national strategy or development plan for higher education—setting out national objectives. Similarly, many governments (e.g. Ireland, Netherlands, Hong Kong, Finland and New Zealand) are adopting the policy tool of performance agreements or compacts to better align higher education institutions (HEI) with the national objectives, involving identification of appropriate performance management and indicators. The process by which national objectives are determined varies but may involve a group comprising national and international ‘experts’, sometimes using consultation mechanisms (open or limited). The concept of public good has played a significant role in (re)positioning higher

15.2.2026

education over recent years. This is especially so in response to growing demands for greater accountability for all public organisations, but also, specific concerns regarding growing higher education access/participation, costs/debt, graduate employability/unemployment, and social/economic impact. This paper takes a practical approach—by asking ‘what is the public good’ and ‘who defines it’ and looking at how different countries are approaching the issue. (HRK / Abstract übernommen)