The question of the social and economic impact or contribution of higher education now engages many national systems. One categorisation developed by social science refers to private and public goods. The frontier problem is that of ‘public’ goods. Many practices of HEIs are not captured as benefits for individual students or companies but are consumed jointly. However, although some private goods produced by higher education, such as the associated earnings benefits, are readily measured, there is little conceptual, empirical or policy clarity about public goods.

Policy in some countries models higher education as a market of competing university corporations, sees the relationship between public and private individual benefits as zero-sum, and focuses primarily on private benefits, with insufficient regard for public goods. But what happens to sociability when the pendulum swings towards private goods?

The paper discusses various approaches to the ‘public’ or ‘social’ outcomes of higher education in social theory, including notions of the common public good (Mainsbridge, 1998), the public sphere (Habermas, 1989; Pusser, 2006) or public goods in the economic sense (Samuelson, 1954; McMahon, 2009; Ostrom, 2010), including global public goods (Stiglitz, 1999, Marginson, 2007). The paper notes also that approaches to the ‘public’ role of higher education vary across the world, according to different political cultures and state traditions. It considers the potential for a common or global approach.

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