

## **Managing social responsibilities in the public value university – A comment on George et al (2023)**

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The article by Bert George and colleagues forthcoming in *Public Money & Management* provides a welcome reminder of the public value that universities can potentially create when they are managed well. Drawing on a mixed methods research design, they illustrate how institutions that integrate their strategic planning and implementation are more likely to do a better job of meeting the social responsibilities that are increasingly ascribed to them than those that adopt a more tokenistic approach. That a comprehensive approach to promoting public values is needed for their achievement is a valuable lesson that has wide application to all public organizations, not to say nonprofits and private companies as well.

At a time when the public purpose of universities in the UK and elsewhere has come under increasing scrutiny from the media and governments embroiled in culture wars, the ideas and arguments put forward by George et al (2023) have important implications for those who believe universities have a unique status as bastions of democratic education (White, 2016). In particular, their call for universities that are committed to fulfilling social responsibilities to become “savvy strategists” aligns with the growing interest in the ways in which universities can actively seek to develop strategies to create public value (see Kitchener, 2019). Like the emerging literature on the public value university, the article emphasizes the importance of social responsibilities that go beyond the creation of economic value, important though that clearly is. One area in which the article is relatively silent, though, is in considering the role that the teaching and research in universities can play in addressing social justice, environmental sustainability, community service and economic development.

Universities have always occupied a distinctive position as the guarantors of a higher education. Within democratic societies, they are also tasked with inculcating the habits of scientific enquiry, critical thinking, respectful disagreement and public justification that can continually renew and revitalise the practice of democracy (White, 2016). Indeed, universities across the world are increasingly responding to pressures from students themselves to undertake changes to their core activities, whether de-colonising their curricula or disinvesting in fossil fuel companies. In this respect, the contribution that universities make to “human formation, knowledge production and innovation” holds the key to responding to the profound global challenges that now confront humanity (Chankseliani and McCowan, 2021, p.1). For that reason, it would be especially interesting to see how George et al’s framework could be developed further and applied to the core activities undertaken by universities. In this respect, the practices within the different departments of universities, as well as those co-ordinated from the centre, would be of particular interest.

George et al demonstrate how institutional level strategic choices can be integrated, but there is plenty of opportunity for their framework to be implemented at a departmental level, and to be expanded in ways that can capture developments in teaching and research. Recent debates about the public purpose of business schools, for example, highlight a growing appetite for new models of purposeful strategic management that have implications for how teaching and research should be conducted as well as wider engagement and outreach activities (see Kitchener et al., 2022). Investigation of the different ways in which social responsibilities are interpreted and addressed within the curricula, seminars, PhD programmes and research priorities of different university departments could therefore expand the notion of the University Social Responsibility (USR) even further. At the same time, while George et al rightly highlight the challenges of identifying non-economic measures of social responsibility that can form the basis for large-scale analyses of USR, the growing emphasis on transparency

in university employment practices may present opportunities for mapping the societal impact of alternative strategic management approaches.

In many countries (and states), universities are now required (or choose) to publish figures relating to their gender and minority ethnic pay gaps, along with figures relating to the representation of women and ethnic minorities at various levels within the workforce. This emphasis on transparency means that a commitment to socially responsible teaching and research can potentially be matched to outcome measures that reveal whether there are tensions between the rhetoric and reality of the strategic management of social responsibilities within universities. Moreover, the “performance” of universities on these indicators could even be compared to that of other public and nonprofit organizations, or, indeed, private firms, which could form the basis for the kinds of cross-sectoral learning that is arguably critical to efforts to address global challenges (George et al., 2016).

In sum, this article serves as a valuable contribution to on-going debates concerning the public purpose of educational institutions. It demonstrates the merits of a comprehensive approach to the strategic management of social responsibilities and presents a useful tool for analysing the way in which that practice can be analysed and understood. As the notion of USR becomes more popular, application of the framework developed here can highlight the policies and practices needed to achieve the public value university.

## References

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