



Corporate Social Responsibility in Higher Education

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Abstract

This paper begins by exploring the ongoing debates about corporate involvement in UK universities and the broader marketization of the higher education sector of which it is but part. Following this, we move on to consider whether higher education institutions might also be conceptualized as corporations in their own right and whether the current preoccupation with ideas of corporate social responsibility might have any progressive potential for those of us interested in addressing the operating principles and practices of the institutions where we work.

When we originally agreed to participate in the RGS conference session from which these short papers derive it was our intention to slightly deviate from the steer provided by the session organizers (which was to address corporate



involvement *in* Geography) by using the opportunity to reflect a little on how far and in what ways we might view higher education institutions as corporations in their own right and whether the current preoccupation with ideas of corporate social responsibility might have any progressive potential for those of us interested in addressing the operating principles and practices of the institutions where we work. As it turned out, we were unable to attend that session and the paper that we have eventually produced here, whilst still tackling those issues, is somewhat wider in its scope and perhaps more direct in its relevance to the overall theme. We begin, therefore, by touching on the wider debates about corporate involvement in universities and the broader marketization of the education sector of which it is but part. What follows relates specifically to the circumstances of the UK context within which we both work, but hopefully it will also be of interest to those working elsewhere.

In some parts of the world (chiefly North America) the most visible aspect of the growing role of major corporations in higher education has stemmed from the commercial deals which have given individual corporations exclusive rights to market their products on university campuses (see the campaign against coke contracts on the CACC blogspot) or the spread of corporate logos and advertising onto university property and merchandise. Thankfully, whilst such tie-ins do exist in the UK, this is nowhere near as widespread a practise as it is on North American campuses, although that certainly gives us no cause for complacency. In the UK, recent debate about private sector involvement has tended instead to revolve around the encroachment of private sector educational corporations into service/course delivery² and the broader impacts of growing corporate involvement in both funding and agenda setting across UK higher education more generally.

This broader debate revolves around the degree to which the increasingly close relationships between UK universities and the corporate world threaten university autonomy and academic freedom. The terms of this debate, we strongly suggest, are influenced by the imbalances of power which have shaped the framework within which it is being conducted – universities and those who work

² The Universities and Colleges Union in the UK is currently running a high-profile campaign drawing attention to the creeping privatization of specific areas of HE provision in the UK. In a letter to Universities UK in January 2007, Sally Hunt (UCU's General Secretary) outlines the unions concerns "*that companies such as Study Group International, KAPLAN and INTO have been in extensive discussion with some UK universities with the aim of taking over the provision of courses in IT, vocational training and language teaching for – in particular overseas students.*" She goes on to say that "*UCU is committed to campaigning vigorously against the privatisation of higher education. We will resist any further attempts to transfer academic departments and staff into private ownership and will defend our members' terms and conditions, including pension rights, as well as the quality of students' education*" (letter available on the UCU website: <http://www.ucu.org.uk>).

within them are not being asked to debate and analyse the ways in which they think the private sector might usefully intervene as part of an ongoing conversation between equals, rather the involvement of the private sector and the spread of private sector practices are assumed axiomatically to be beneficial and involvement in the 'debate' is mandatory.

There is no doubt that the private sector is playing an increasingly important role in UK universities. In fact, enhancing business involvement in universities (in both teaching and research) has been a key goal of successive UK governments. Recent surveys conducted by the Higher Education Funding Council for England (DEL/HEFCE/HEFCW/SHEFC/OST) show strong growth in the involvement of businesses in a wide variety of activities with universities (although the level of collaboration described in those surveys is more limited than is the case for some other industrialized nations) and the UK government remains keen to expand and diversify business/university interactions. The ten year consultation document on Science and Innovation produced by the UK government in 2004 (DfES: DTI: HMT 2004), for example, argued strongly that not only should the private sector be involved in funding 'relevant' research but also that many "*more businesses should become engaged in shaping school and university curricula to inspire and attract the next generation of trained personnel.*"

Along with many others, we have both viewed these developments with some alarm. George Monbiot (2000), for example, provocatively suggests that "*(t)oday, there is scarcely a science faculty in the United Kingdom whose academic freedom has not been compromised by its funding arrangements. Contact between government-funded researchers and industry, having once been discouraged, is now, in many departments, effectively compulsoryour universities have been offered for sale, with the result that objectivity and intellectual honesty are becoming surplus to requirements.*" There seems in the consultations of the government and the DfES to be little or no awareness that there might be any conflict at all between the role played by universities as both examples and providers of social, public goods and the involvement of the profit motive - instead, in fundamentalist neoliberal fashion, profit-making private interest is assumed to lead, 'invisible hand'-style, to the same beneficial ends.

We therefore share some of the concerns of Monbiot and other critics – we would suggest, for instance, that the core of the belief system that underpins the increasingly mandatory quest for private sector funding, management systems and 'best practices' bears an increasing resemblance to the refrain of the 1980s, 'There Is No Alternative'. We have an inherent mistrust of the growing involvement of the private sector and the creeping marketization of our institutions themselves but nevertheless, whilst we maintain a healthy scepticism over the impacts of corporate involvement in higher education, that shouldn't allow us (as critical geographers) to restrict our interaction with the corporate sector to telling them to go away.....

Perhaps somewhat controversially, therefore, we would argue that however much we may dislike the fact as individual academics, private sector involvement in UK universities is here to stay and all the indications are that the private sector will play an ever more important role over the coming years. How, then, are we to respond to this scenario? A hardline total opposition to all forms of private sector-university collaboration because of its role in normalizing the new pro-market, pro-business neo-liberal philosophy and to refuse all collaboration in such ventures would make for great political sloganeering but would surely be little more than a vain attempt to shut the door after the horse has bolted. Whilst it might be feasible for us as geographers to avoid engaging with the private sector, it certainly isn't feasible for many of our colleagues working in departments that are far more dependent on private sector collaboration and funding for their research activities. We are of course anyway already directly involved in many activities with the private sector via our editing of journals, marketing of courses and so on.

From our perspective, the most important issue is not so much the growing role of the private sector in our institutions per se but the environment of university governance in which it is taking place. Academics, research groups, departments, faculties and schools are experiencing the pressure to collaborate being built into job descriptions, being made central to the drive to publish and becoming the core to the development of research projects, all seemingly without a coherent overall strategy except the simplistic assumption that more private sector involvement is better. How then are we to claim a place at the big table at which the grander theoretical questions of the place of the market in education are discussed? In practice and on the back foot for the foreseeable future, it may be that the most important thing we can do is to try and preserve those spaces within our institutions where we are able to raise questions about our relationship with the private sector and the direction of future policies and to make sure that we are actively involved in those debates.

Clearly then, for most of us, serious reflection on these issues must revolve around *how* we interact with the private sector, not whether we interact with it. Most campaigning action in relation to this issue has to date been selective, that is focused on influencing the actions of individual companies or questioning relationships with particularly problematic corporations. This might involve challenging the actions of the specific corporations with whom we come most closely into contact in our own academic lives (e.g. focussing on Elsevier's involvement in the running of arms fairs because they are a corporation with whom most of us have regular interactions) or opposing our institutions' involvement with those large corporations whose actions we find most reprehensible (e.g. supporting campaigns to reverse exclusive university beverage contracts with Coca-Cola because of their practices in Colombia and India or boycotting the RGS because of their association with Shell). More importantly perhaps, we also need to think carefully about what different types of organization we are encompassing under the

banner of 'the private sector' and how that affects our views on interacting with them. Few of us would argue that general opposition to collaboration with the private sector should extend to collaboration with small-scale social enterprises but what about research collaboration with small and medium enterprises (or indeed major corporations) working, for example, on new renewable energy products.

There remain, therefore, serious questions about how we should be engaging with the private sector, over and above campaigning against those elements of their activities which we most object to. Are we totally compromised if we view corporate funding as another potential source of funding for certain aspects of our research? Few of us express serious reservations about applying for money from the research councils or individual government departments, despite our strong disagreement with many areas of government policy. There is however far more scepticism about embarking on policy discussions with the private sector and still more over entering into discussions over research funding or engagement in consultancy, although it's not often entirely clear on what principles this distinction is based.

Over recent months we as researchers have been forced to make our own decisions over whether we should engage in research/consultancy work with the private sector and on what basis we should decide. We were invited to carry out some research into Latin American financial service provision and urban poverty by a major financial services corporation who were interested in expanding credit operations in those markets. Despite our initial scepticism about being involved, we were also well aware of the very real problems faced by the urban poor in Latin American cities in getting secure and affordable access to credit, due to the lack of interest of the formal banking sector and the paucity of any alternative state provision (despite the micro-credit schemes which have blossomed across the continent).

We therefore saw this as an opportunity to delve into the spaces available for the development of more appropriate financial instruments within the formal financial services sector and to explore the potential role of better informed and targeted financial services in assisting those sectors currently excluded from the banking system. At the same time we had no illusions about the motivations underlying the commissioning of this research and we were therefore uneasy about the decision we made to undertake it. It soon became clear that what our corporate sponsor wanted was not our more nuanced appraisal of financial services and the needs of the urban poor but a rather cruder take on how it could expand its own lending (particularly in the area of credit cards), but this was hardly a surprise. We still felt that it was a useful experience both in terms of raising the profile (however minimally) of provision to low income sectors within the corporation itself and perhaps more importantly in terms of developing our understanding of the operational practice of the corporation concerned.

Just as important as questions of the funding and the commissioning of research is the question of meaningful engagement with the private sector in the development of research. Recently, we have spent considerable time exploring questions surrounding corruption and anti—corruption campaigns. Through this work we have forged close relationships with civil society organizations working to expose corruption in both public and private sectors and whilst we share with them a suspicion of the crass over-simplifications which dominate official international responses to corruption which tend to focus on the state as the location of corruption, we also feel that it is important to engage with the private sector over this issue. In other words, it is all very well to point out the problem with an over-emphasis on the state as the location of corruption but it is insufficient to replace this with an over-simplified argument about corruption in neoliberal reform processes. Instead, we are currently seeking to explore different private sector responses to the opportunities for corruption that privatization and liberalization frequently embody and what factors give rise to them. And if that involves working directly with different elements of the private sector in exploring those issues then so much the better.

In the final analysis the personal is political - given the experiences outlined above, we feel that, whilst we have to remain cautious in our dealings with the private sector, we should also be seeking to actively engage with it. The crucial question is how we are to develop appropriate mechanisms for deciding on what basis our engagement with the private sector should be carried out. Not only that, but as critical geographers it is our job to analyse the vastly unequal power relationships that currently define the debate over privatization and marketization. It is one of those delightful ironies that the original market-based theories put into practice by the Thatcher government in the UK during the 1980s (from which the current debate derives) were introduced by virtue of their allegedly radical nature, a necessary set of changes to a perceived stagnant theoretical mind-set, itself the cause of rampant economic decay. Now it is the perception of critics that those proudly radical policies and theories are become themselves that thing of which they purported to be the cure, and the radical academic has to engage critically with the unquestioned doxa that the market has become to detect the next radical.

Up to this point we have largely been treating the private sector as something which is external to a largely public university sector in the UK and considering what implications this has had (and will have) for the functioning of the latter. However, it could be argued that, rather than seeing universities as public institutions under attack from the encroachment of marketization and the private sector, we would do better to view our own institutions as corporations in their own right. Whilst UK Universities may not be accountable to shareholders or driven only by the profit motive, they are increasingly operating as if those were their chief considerations. This is reflected in: the increasing ‘commodification of education as product’ (Mitchell, 1999:387 cited in Castree and Sparke, 2000), the

increasingly cut-throat competition between institutions and departments promoted through the UK government's Research Assessment Exercise, the outsourcing of non-core functions, the advent of full economic costing, the aggressive marketing of UK universities overseas as part of internationalization strategies, the prioritization of more immediately commercial research, the financial incentivization of senior academic and administrative staff to drive the business case, the increasingly hierarchical division of academic labour and the increasing use of 'flexible' labour contracts and increasing engagement in direct competition with the non-university private sector for research and other consultancy contracts etc. (see Castree and Sparke, 2000)

Given such a corporatized environment, the question that we want to explore here in this final section of the paper is what the idea of corporate social responsibility (CSR) might have to say of relevance for our discussions over the institutions within which we work and the wider impacts which they have (including of course their relationships with corporate sponsors, government etc.). Is it possible, for instance, that some blend of the ideas inherent in CSR and older ideas of higher education as a social good can be used to drive and direct a more coherent, cogent further education strategy in the UK and elsewhere?

The idea of CSR has been around for a long time, beginning with the work of writers such as Bowen (1953 – cited by many as the 'father' of CSR) and carrying on through the work of Davis (1960, 1973) Johnson (1971), Jones (1980, 1983) and more recently Carroll (1991, 1999). The idea really exploded however in the period following the Earth Summit in 1992, since which event CSR has become a veritable industry in its own right with its own 'practitioners journals conferences' etc. Serious reflection on the impacts of CSR seems loosely divided into two camps;³ on the one hand, from those most closely connected to its praxis, there is the idea that whilst CSR might not be perfect, it has at least in some cases led to significant transformations in how individual corporations conduct their business. WBCSD (2002), for example, in reviewing the evolution of CSR argue that it has been successfully mainstreamed and that "partnerships and alliances that are firmly rooted in social responsibility ground are flourishing. Among them are a range of collaborations which promote such initiatives as good employee relations, community empowerment, educational awareness and supply chain/customer engagement. Sensible companies dare not embark on major decisions without

³ There is a fascinating discussion between Jonathan Porrit and George Monbiot over the appropriateness of Porrit's close relationship with the corporate world on Monbiot's website (it originally appeared in *The Ecologist*). See "Does working with business compromise the environmentalist" at <http://www.monbiot.com/archives/2000/09/01/does-working-with-business-compromise-the-environmentalist/> (last accessed 20/12/07).

having first undertaken well-organized dialogues with their stakeholders” (WBCSD 2002:6).

On the other hand, however, CSR is seen by critics as little more than a PR exercise designed to give the appearance of social responsibility and changing commercial practice whilst in reality doing nothing to change corporate priorities or operating practice. Christian Aid released a major critique of CSR in 2004 which described it as “a completely inadequate response to the sometimes devastating impact that multinational companies can have in an ever-more globalised world.... it is actually used to mask that impact. Those who suffer the most as a result are the poor and vulnerable people in developing countries and the environments in which they live” (Christian Aid 2004).

What role CSR might play in transforming the operating practice of corporations will plainly depend on what middle-ground can be sought between these two opposing viewpoints, and the dynamic that drives the debate between them; it lies well beyond the scope of this brief essay to take those debates any further here (although this is an issue which we are currently considering in considerably greater depth) but it is worth pointing out that even the most critical voices in the critical management literature do explore potential ways in which CSR (or related concepts) might be developed more effectively. One trenchant criticism of CSR (for instance) is the degree to which best practices and indices to measure it are being developed by way of internal assessment methodologies by businesses themselves, methodologies that exclude the voice and agency of civil society almost completely - we are therefore currently exploring the relationship between measures of CSR and external verification through partnerships with independent stakeholders and other partners, as only one of a variety of ways in which both debate and practice can be driven forward.

Returning now to the original focus of this piece, it is we believe plain that the idea of CSR has some use for universities interested in exploring how they operate within profoundly new circumstances and understanding the impacts that they have upon the broader society within which they are located (and that clearly has to encompass much more than the region within which they are located). It is also important, in the context of the issues which we discussed earlier in this piece about the governance of the higher education sector, that CSR is an issue which UK universities are already starting to explore. We have ourselves already been heavily involved in an application to HEFCE to explore the relevance of CSR to the operating practice of all higher education intuitions across the East Midlands; whilst in April 2007 a report by a group working at Leeds Metropolitan University entitled *Making Universities Count* funded by HEFCE, and produced in collaboration with Business in the Community (BiTC) and the Environmental Association for Colleges and Universities (EACU) made a first attempt to apply BiTC’s indexes to the university sector.

This emerging engagement with CSR potentially gives us an, albeit limited, framework within which we can raise concerns about the impacts of marketization and debate the functions and aspirations of UK universities in the twenty first century. Of course, senior HE managers may well yet steer clear of the whole issue (it should be noted that only five of the twenty five universities involved in the BiTC study completed the CSR indexes as opposed to the twenty who completed the Environment Index which would appear redolent of the reticence of some university managers to even contemplate the internally verified BITC methodology let alone any more externally-verifiable alternative that we might like to suggest) or engage with it as little more than a PR tool. Nevertheless, our experience suggests that, in some institutions at least, there is a willingness to engage with the breadth of issues that a meaningful CSR strategy would need to tackle.

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