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Article abstract

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Higher Education and Dilemmas of Deinstitutionalization

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The pandemic has made the mass remote delivery of higher education more plausible as a general direction for growth in the long-term. Choosing between this general direction and the status quo introduces various ethical dilemmas having to do with the basic aims and values of higher education. A move to remote learning as the institutional norm may set back some of these aims and values while advancing others. However, we also argue that complicating the assessment of these dilemmas is epistemic uncertainty about the traditional (i.e., late-twentieth-century) institutional context and what makes that context educationally worthwhile. Addressing these dilemmas requires a better understanding of what an educational institution is as well as those respects in which it adds value to society's educational projects.

Introduction

The aims of higher education are pursued in an institutional context. This context hosts a number of characteristic social practices that distinguish it from other educational enterprises, such as schooling.[1]

The recent pandemic response imposed a historic, large-scale retreat from many of these social practices, if only temporarily and in a patchwork way. The successes and failures of this response occasions philosophical reflection about the value of this institutional context.

Why do we think so? After all, one could grant that the pandemic brings empirical changes while denying that these changes touch on higher education's philosophical dimension.[2] For example, it might be worthwhile and important to find out how the benefits and burdens of the higher education system were redistributed during the pandemic. However, the concepts and principles that one might draw from in assessing the fairness of that redistribution are no different than they were pre-pandemic.

We agree that some care should be taken to avoid overstating the philosophical implications of COVID-19. Therefore, we lead off our argument with a mundane observation: the pandemic has made the mass remote delivery of higher education more plausible (and for some, more attractive) as a general direction[3] for growth in the long-term. Choosing between this general direction and the status quo introduces various ethical dilemmas having to do with the basic aims and values of higher education.[4] A

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[1] We take "higher education" to include a range of post-compulsory institutions that can be found in society such as universities, colleges, and trade schools.

[2] For a skeptical view of higher education aims as a topic for philosophical analysis, see White, 1997.

[3] We say "general" because remote learning in higher education has long been in the works. We distinguish between the piecemeal adoption of these innovations and remote higher education as a new institutional norm or standard of practice.

[4] We view Jennifer Morton's (2016) analysis of the educational divide between on-campus and online students as a prescient articulation and response to this kind of dilemma. Much of our analysis is indebted to the issues she foregrounds in that analysis.

move to remote learning as the institutional norm may set back some of these aims and values while advancing others. However, we also argue that complicating the assessment of these dilemmas is uncertainty about the extent to which traditional (i.e., late-twentieth-century) institutional contexts are essential to society's educational projects.

Higher Education Aims and Institutional Norms

The educational aims that a liberal state pursues on behalf of society are coordinated through institutions. Higher education is no exception.[5] It is structured in order to meet a range of purposes. It is also subject to institutional norms for reasons that are often independent of these purposes. Norms of distributive fairness come to mind. Let us assume, as an example, that the development of mind and intellectual progress are aims for which higher education institutions such as universities are responsible. But let us also assume that higher education institutions ought to satisfy political requirements of justice that apply to most any organization. If universities incidentally or intentionally allocate valuable socioeconomic opportunities along the way to realizing their educational aims, it seems reasonable to expect those opportunities to be distributed fairly. But imagine that the reforms necessary for ensuring such a fair distribution could only succeed at the cost of lowering academic standards or curtailing intellectual progress. Implementing the reforms would lead to a better institution in general but set back the educational goals that justify the university as an institution (see O'Brien, forthcoming).

Simply put, higher education faces dilemmas arising from its status as a mass institution. These dilemmas are familiar topics for philosophical analysis. However, we think that the pandemic experience calls attention to the freestanding value of this institutional context.

By "freestanding" we mean the good that an institution can serve *qua* institution. Philosophers have identified various aims of higher education, including civic education, upward social mobility, creativity, wellbeing, personal autonomy, and the development of mind. Let us assume that these aims are all plausible. But why seek to identify them? Sometimes it is a reaction to what we believe that a higher education system *should* be doing as opposed to what it *does* (e.g., "universities ought to aim for the development of mind before employability"). But note that in cases such as this, the argument is a matter of institutional *emphasis* – a calling of our attention to aspects of a higher education that are neglected or undervalued. But the idea of "higher education" as an institution is never in question; rather, the focus of analysis is on the relative priority of the various goods that the institution should be striving to achieve.

However, as one of us has argued elsewhere,[6] we can also think of the justification of higher education *aims* as the justification of an educational *institution*. How is this any different from what we described, above?

Imagine a society in which there is no higher education system. Instead, our post-school educational lives were defined by a variety of uncoordinated and informal activities. Engagement in these activities are motivated by an intuitive sense that they are vaguely developmental.

One could turn to this society and claim that some of these activities are educationally worthwhile while the rest only seem that way. But notice that such an argument does not have to appeal to any premises about institutions. It is basically advice: "If, as an adult, you want a truly educational experience this is what I think you should aim for among the informal activities that your society currently has on offer."

Claiming that some range of activities are *so* educationally important that society should subsidize them (and not others, in the case of fully private provision) or that the state should have authority over

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[5] We can include here the way in which the state organizes the relationship between the private and public provision of higher education as part of this coordinating effort.

[6] See Martin, 2022.

their scope and quality is different. It is a claim that seeks to enlist the cooperation of society in bringing those activities about.

If such claims are to do more than arbitrarily cater to the interests of the influential and powerful, they must be backed by something that warrants society's allocation of resources, conferral of authority, and so on, to such a project. This is why higher education aims are often justified in reference to individual and social returns such as political stability, economic growth, or public knowledge – benefits that individuals and all of society will receive in return for their investment.

This gets us to our first "freestanding" value. Higher education institutions coordinate our actions in order to generate social returns that would be far more difficult to achieve on our own. For example, imagine that higher education institutions are best justified in terms of civic aims – they should help citizens who will move into powerful social positions become more aware of the needs and interests of a diverse society. Now imagine that my reasons, and your reasons, and everybody else's reasons for getting a post-compulsory education have nothing to do with this aim. We all want the post-graduation income and status boost. Nothing more.

If society is to get the desired social returns, we each need to experience an environment that socializes us into this civic ethic irrespective of our self-interested goals. But we have no interest in such an environment beyond what would be absolutely necessary in order to advance those goals. The institutional context makes this environment part of the educational process by requiring us to encounter different scholarly and political points of view alongside other students with different needs, values, and commitments.

The institutional context's contribution to higher education aims is not limited to social returns, however. Some citizens take the pursuit of knowledge to be central to their conception of a good life. Others do not value knowledge in quite this way but see the development of their critical thinking as key to their life's projects. Universities support both of these pursuits through an institutional context in which the norms of reflection and open inquiry are paramount and subject to protection. It is difficult to imagine a university apart from this context. Consider, for example, an educational institution in which the social practice of inquiry – inquiry as a cooperative undertaking carried out with others – is not observed by anyone. The term "university" does not easily apply because the institutional context is at odds with what we believe we must obtain in order to realize the educational aims that are characteristic of the university as an ideal.

The Pandemic Deinstitutionalization of Higher Education

Let us call the institutional context as described above "robust." It is robust, insofar as it is pervasive in the educational life of students regardless of their particular reasons for attending.

The pandemic involved an abrupt move away from this robust institutional context. Individual students could continue to take courses at a distance. Researchers and practitioners still hosted (online) talks. Citizens of the higher education community were engaged in something called "higher education." But the social forms and practices – the expectations that tie individuals together and give them reason to come together – were largely gone. This includes practices that involve physical spaces such as laboratories, libraries, and lectures. But it also included opportunities to engage in sustained communication with each other. For example, when the "Zoom meeting" ends, communication abruptly ends. That is a significant deviation from the institutional norm. (Most of us have had the experience of the meeting *after* the meeting, the class *after* the class – those informal modes of interaction in which we try to understand better what we experienced in the formal meeting or classroom space.) The result was something like the pursuit of higher education aims in the absence of a robust institutional content.

In what follows, we offer one interpretation of this pandemic "deinstitutionalization," or thinning, of higher education.

It is plausible to think that higher education, in its many and diverse forms, is basic to liberal society.[7] It should therefore strive for justice above and beyond what would be expected of, say, specifically commercial enterprises. But it is not obvious that higher education really is basic to society in the same way that, say, the legal system is. The fact that higher education systems can be found in liberal democracies, and that many people attend them, is a contingent fact. This only means that higher education is like any other popular association such as a church or volunteer organization. Universities and colleges and trade schools are valuable, to be sure, but not something that a civic society should have a heavy hand in managing. Higher education is a service; the consumer sovereign.

In practice, it looks as if higher education is both a basic institution *and* a commercial service provider. Individual institutions are free to compete against one another in line with a free market economy. Consumer choices structure that market. Yet, the larger system is often managed (through, for example, funding incentives) by the state. And institutional leaders claim that a higher education advances public, non-commercial interests such as civic tolerance and intellectual curiosity.

The pandemic seemed to shift the equilibrium. Stripped of its institutional context, higher education tilted (in a functional if not a principled way) in the direction of service provision. This may explain why so many institutions were able to charge students tuition even as their campuses were closed. Part of it is because students had a compelling economic reason to stay enrolled regardless of what they believed was fair. But we suspect that there was no institutional "heft" or reality to remind them that this was, distributively speaking, abnormal if not unjust. This also made it easier to think of the higher education experience as fundamentally transactional and unanchored from any social vision. There is also an interesting subtext that may have compounded this view: if subtracting the institutional experience does not lower the educational costs that a student is required to shoulder, it must be because the institutional context confers no real educational benefits, or none worth paying for.

Uncertainty about "Robust" Institutions

The pandemic experience has made the remote provision of higher education more plausible as a general direction for future growth and development. Our interpretation of this experience as a "deinstitutionalization" of higher education reveals some potential dilemmas in choosing between this general direction and the traditional approach. Unlike what we have described above, these are dilemmas that come with choosing between robust institutions and deinstitutionalization.

One dilemma is between the returns made possible by the institutional context and the returns made possible through the *thinning* of that context. We can reasonably foresee the benefits of a higher education pursued free from the demands and constraints of its more robust version (see Trow, 1989). A reduction of service and opportunity costs, of ethical costs (Morton, 2019), and so on, seems likely. It would no longer be an expectation that the student must go where the institution is, and there would be little incentive for them to do so. Students who would otherwise have to leave the communities where they work, volunteer, and carry out family life could easily remain. Yet, we can also foresee setbacks in terms of the returns that are traditionally associated with higher education institutions (civic, cognitive, and so on). The problem is not that one set of returns is "good" and the other "bad." Both may be valuable. The difficult question is which set ought to be a priority for a liberal democratic society.

A second dilemma is between the pursuit of an individual's own goals and the pursuit of justice. Institutional contexts are organized around certain values. These values can unintentionally lead to some ideas of the good life receiving greater educational support than others. The modern research university, for example, has become a gateway to many of the pursuits in life that receive the greatest social status, income, and recognition. A deinstitutionalized higher education could break this near-monopoly and

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[7] We could claim that they are "pervasive" in a Rawlsian sense and therefore part of the basic structure of a liberal society.

widen the range of options in life that receive educational recognition and support (we say more about this below). However, citizens are also under a natural duty to support or advance the justice and fairness of our institutions. But where the institution is less salient, so too the salience of any injustice that we would otherwise respond to. The infamous "daily me," in which our consumption of media is radically individualized to suit our individual preferences without ever having to be exposed to other points of view, could extend to our relationship to the educational goods we consume through a "deinstitutionalized" higher education. And this could mean a narrower sense of what justice means more generally, as well as what it should look like in education. Insofar as we think that higher education institutions can and should advance justice in distinctive ways, there are trade-offs to consider here, then, as well.

Complicating these dilemmas is the possibility that our attachment to a robust institutional context is simply due to our comfort and familiarity with educational institutions as we knew them before the rise of the digital public sphere and social media. Epistemic uncertainty about the extent to which our institutional attachments are principled or contingent can make it difficult to think through these trade-offs. For example, the belief that we need a robust institutional context to acquire civic and other norms may reflect a non-rational attachment to brick-and-mortar spaces. So too the notion that justice is better mediated through institutions as opposed to individuals.[8] But how do we know one way or the other?

This raises difficult (and, we think, interesting) questions about what an educational institution is in its essence, why institutions could be valuable even were it possible to realize all sorts of educational values without them, and how to distinguish between those features of educational institutions that are contingent/empirical from those that are necessary.[9] If institutional design is a neutral medium for the achievement of higher education aims – a mere means to an end – we can claim that an institution is whatever form of organization best realizes those aims even if that form is "anti-social." We think that the pandemic experience gives us reason to examine this claim more closely, especially if the "shift" to online learning portends something more widespread and enduring.

One way to work through this epistemic uncertainty is to think of the justification of the aims of higher education in the more fundamental terms that we described, above.[10] What kind of post-school educational institutions, if any, should people benefit from having *after* their basic education is complete? Are the benefits that these institutions provide essential or merely discretionary? What aims should they be committed to? What role would the state have in managing them?

We think that this approach can ameliorate uncertainty in two ways. First, it allows for the possibility of a role for education in the lives of adult citizens that diverges from, or greatly expands on, how actual liberal societies have conceived of this role. Such arguments can push us to reimagine what higher education institutions are, and what they need to be. They can help us tease apart the institutionally familiar from the institutionally valuable or necessary.

Second, it steers us away from resting arguments about the role of education in the lives of adult citizens on de facto values embedded in the post-compulsory institutions that we already have. We have an institutional regime that embodies entrenched ideas about what a post-secondary education looks like, including who can attend and how it can be funded. We can certainly arrive at insights into how these existing institutions can do a better job of promoting a just, fair, and free society. However, the critical potential of these reformist insights is greatly limited when we take such institutions as given.

The growth and expansion of higher education is not an end in itself. Everything depends on the direction that this growth and expansion takes. We need a standard (or standards) by which we can judge what directions are desirable and undesirable, adequate and inadequate, fully realized and incomplete, just

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[8] As Cohen (1997) noted some time ago.

[9] For interesting theoretical work on institutions that could be brought to bear, see Miller (2010) and Searle (2010).

[10] In Martin (2022) this hypothetical approach is used as a first step in the argument for higher education as a right of all liberal citizens. On this account higher education is supportive of the personal autonomy of all adult citizens over a complete life. See in particular chapters 3 and 4 of *The Right to Higher Education*.

and unjust. But this standard should also be equipped to grapple with growth that proceeds by way of institutional thinning.

Anxieties provoked by change and disruption are likely to look quaint in retrospect. It may be that at least some of our present-day thinking about the value of higher education institutions may be too conditioned by the familiar. The pandemic experience has made us aware of this possibility. Philosophical inquiry will help us to confront it.

Acknowledgments

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