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Higher education for public value: taking the debate beyond New Public Management

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ABSTRACT

Many higher education (HE) system reforms in the past decades have been built on the paradigm of New Public Management (NPM). However, these reforms have not allowed HE to fully take its value for society into account. In recent years a growing call can be heard to orient the HE sector towards more collaboration, a focus on a larger set of socio-economic objectives instead of on performance alone, less pressure, more trust and legitimacy. In this article, it is stated that NPM has not sufficiently enabled the creation of public value (PV) by the HE sector. This article provides (1) insight into the flaws of NPM, (2) an understanding of PV for HE and (3) a new model to study HE reforms built on the concept of PV.

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Introduction

International organisations, scholars and policy-makers regularly repeat the importance Higher Education (HE) systems have for socio-economic development (Cremonini, Westerheijden, Benneworth, & Dauncey, 2014; European Commission, 2010). For instance, the OECD (2011) calculated that each graduate (in the US, the UK and Austria) creates a net \$70,000 of public benefits, both economic (e.g., greater productivity) and social (e.g., less crime). It is also argued that citizens want a highly performing HE system, efficient in achieving the desired outcomes, operating justly and fairly, and for societal benefit (Bryson, Crosby, & Bloomberg, 2014).

Despite the belief that HE systems have or should have an added value to society, it continues to be a challenge to create that overall benefit. The European Commission (2011) identified the following challenges necessitating further reform efforts: a relatively low total investment in HE, a too small proportion of the workforce that is highly qualified, too few researchers in the labour force, and higher education institutions (HEIs) often competing in many areas, while few have the capacity to excel across the board. Particularly striking in this debate is that there still is a call for new reforms, despite the many reforms the HE sector has already been confronted with over the years.

Why is it, then, that past reforms have not been enough? We argue in this article that the paradigm of New Public Management (NPM) on which HE system reforms

have been built, to some extent ignores the importance of other than performance and economic objectives, and that those broader objectives are particularly important for HE as a policy sector. Herewith we state that reforms of the HE system based on NPM cannot lead HE to realise fully its public value (PV), as NPM offers too narrow a view on HE and does not allow a clear view on actual reform outcomes. We contend that a broader perspective is necessary for (research on) HE policy and reform, whereby the role of internal and external stakeholders is crucial, especially the dialogue in which they define what the purpose of HE in society should be. This means that we do not plea for a single one-size-fits-all model, but for a model assigning vital importance to a broad dialogue between stakeholders in which they determine what the value of HE for society should be, what is needed to realise that PV and when it is sufficiently reached. In other words: if we want to assess the impact of future reforms, a framework is needed that incorporates the multiple objectives of HE (instead of focusing on performance alone) and, even more importantly, that looks at the relevant stakeholders and the discursive way in which their assessment of HE defines the role of HE in society. For this, we propose the concept of PV as a new model to take the debate on the impact of future HE reform beyond NPM. The PV model does not discard NPM altogether, but encompasses it in a broader perspective on HE.

In the next paragraphs NPM will be briefly presented, and the flaws of reforms based on NPM. Then PV will be introduced as an alternative model to look at HE reform.

Background and research questions

HE systems have been under substantial reform during the last decades, comparable with the numerous NPM-based public sector reforms that OECD countries have implemented to increase organisational efficiency, effectiveness and performance (Dobbins, Knill, & Vögtle, 2011). Also in HE, the governance reforms have mostly followed this NPM-route (De Boer, Enders, & Schimank, 2008), though its principles are not implemented in every sector in the same way or to the same degree (Eurydice, 2008). Indeed, countries have sought new ways to steer the HE sector: governments have reduced their expenditure on HE and have introduced the market as coordination mechanism (Middlehurst & Teixeira, 2012), liberalisation and privatisation have become part of HE in many countries, and performance agreements or competitive funding have been introduced to maximise the return on investment of the HE.

In general, NPM has been criticised because of its intra-governmental focus in an increasingly pluralist world (Osborne, 2006), and because it has led to unwanted side-effects as fragmentation or diminished coordination (Hammerschmid, Van de Walle, Oprisor, & Stimac, 2013). To a certain extent this criticism can also be applied to HE. As Marginson (2014, p. 31) states, 'the one-sided fixation with market competition [...] has obscured the rich potential [of HE] for public good'. Many social purposes of HE are losing their resonance in the rush to make HEIs accountable and responsive (Singh, 2001). Recent research (Broucker & De Wit, 2015) has shown that the effects of NPM in HE are unclear, as is the future of NPM as a paradigm driving reforms. Given these criticisms, it has become necessary to analyse HE policy and reform from other perspectives, as it seems that a pure NPM approach is not sufficient for grasping the full richness of HE.

Therefore, we propose a model based on the concept of PV. To come to this model, the following research questions are addressed:

- (1) What are the flaws and unintended effects of NPM-based HE reforms?
- (2) What is the meaning of PV for HE?
- (3) Which insights derived from PV theory allow for the construction of a model that goes beyond NPM?

Flaws and unintended effects of NPM-based HE system reforms

Neo-liberal universities and NPM

As a general concept, key elements of NPM are, among other things, disaggregation, competition, customer orientation, and a focus on efficiency and results (Broucker & De Wit, 2015; Dunleavy, Margetts, Bastow, & Tinkler, 2006; Scott, 2015). From this non-exhaustive list, it has been stated (Broucker & De Wit, 2015) that NPM can be considered as a toolbox wherefrom governments choose instruments wherever they see relevance. The NPM-based HE system reform has brought a wave of neo-liberalism in universities worldwide (De Vries & Nemec, 2013; Scott, 2015), thereby inducing a corporate culture (Trowler, 1998, p. 29).

Universities had to diversify their funding resources, leading to more competition (Enders, De Boer, File, Jongbloed, & Westerheijden, 2011; Marginson, 2014; Peters, 2013), and had to transform themselves into ‘corporate actors’ (De Boer et al., 2008; Marginson, 2009). Some universities have raised tuition fees (Frances, 2015; Scott, 2015) or have expanded their audience by attracting foreign students, or by establishing campuses abroad. This trend has been intensified by ranking systems that stimulate inter-university competition (Pritchard, Klumpp, & Teichler, 2015; Scott, 2015). Universities have also expanded knowledge production by creating research parks, establishing public-private co-operation for research activities, and commercialising research and education results (Marginson, 2009; Scott, 2015).

NPM and its flaws

Scholars have argued that NPM has not always been to the advantage of HE. Giroux (2010), for instance, concludes that HE has been subjected to ‘a corporate-based ideology that embraces standardising the curriculum, supporting top-down management, and reducing all levels of education to job-training sites’ and he pleads instead for ‘shared governance between faculty and administrators, educating students as critical citizens rather than potential employees of Walmart, or affirming faculty as scholars and public intellectuals ...’ (Giroux, 2010, p. 185). He proposes a system that has a legitimate place in society as a public good and that protects the equality of educational opportunities.

Other examples of criticism include Carvalho’s (2015) account of the reduced autonomy of universities and grade inflation in private schools in Portugal, and Gaethgens (2015) assessment of the German ‘Excellence Initiative’ that has delivered benefits for only a few HEIs. Australian social scientists question the persisting managerial character of university administration (Harman, 2005). Frances (2015) criticises the high tuition fees in the USA,

which is confirmed for the UK by Strike (2015), where students are now facing large debts (see also Marginson, 2014). De Boer et al. (2008) point at ‘the competitive pressure’ in the UK and its negative consequences. Shattock (2008, p. 191) summarises the UK HE policy as follows, ‘tighten controls, budget cuts, freeze new appointments, campaign against waste (value of money), squeeze the system’. Sutton (2017) states that the university has, because of its neo-liberal focus, lost its moral norm of education as a public good.

The criticism on NPM in HE runs parallel to the criticisms on NPM in the larger public sector. First, there is a call for more collaboration and trust, less pressure and a less narrow focus on performance. Second, little is known about the outcomes of NPM reforms and, though the authors above highlight to a certain extent their criteria to assess the success rate of a reform, the evaluation criteria remain vague, somehow normative and lacks objective data. One of the reasons is that it is difficult to prove that HE has become cheaper, more efficient or effective because of the NPM reform. Another reason is that, according to our argumentation, it is only possible to evaluate the reform effects if the system as a whole is put back into its broader context.

Contextualising NPM and HE policy

If we want to assess the flaws linked to NPM-based policy and reform, it is important to reflect systematically about the policy process, to understand not only policy and its intended outcomes, but also its complexity and the multitude of goals, given the many stakeholders and policy steps in the process. Therefore, a simplified version of a policy process is provided and discussed hereunder to clarify our line of argumentation.

As hinted above, a crucial element in the policy process is the influence of stakeholders and their interest in policy. Understanding their role leads to a better understanding of the policy. Therefore, they are central in Figure 1.

The decision-making line is represented as a flow from target definition to agreement. In this flow, stakeholders might have mutually different definitions of the targets, the means and the ends of the process. Moreover, these definitions might change over time or under the influence of the discourse among the stakeholders (Schmidt, 2008).

This means that policy is not a straight line from a to b, but that it runs along a diversity of discourses. De Wit and Verhoeven (2000) have shown that internal (e.g., professors, students) and external stakeholders (e.g., external members of the board, alumni) have a different impact on the institutional policy of universities and a different relationship

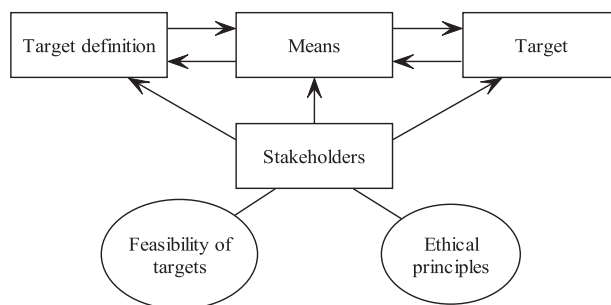


Figure 1. Policy decision-making.

with other stakeholders. Chapleo and Simms (2010) counted in their study 30 types of stakeholders at a British university and found out that the impact of the different types might be different for student recruitment, strategic direction and policy, and funding and income. Thus, if we want to understand the flaws of HE reforms, it will be important to know who is defining the flaws, what targets and means these stakeholders see as feasible and ethically acceptable, and when they consider a target as attained.

This might be one of the reasons why it is difficult to assess the impact of NPM-related reforms, because NPM actually assumes a kind of objective measure to assess efficiency and performance, while the criteria to assess flaws or successes are more likely a compromise between the stakeholders' opinions. One crucial element in this assessment by the stakeholders is their perception on equality of educational opportunities, for which we refer to Husen's classification of 1972:

- A conservative view on equality stresses that one's capacities depends on its social class: manual skills are more present in the working class, abstract thinking more in the 'leading' class. Nowadays this perspective is generally not supported.
- A liberal view emphasises that everyone is born with a more or less constant intelligence and that society has to retrieve all obstacles for the development of the students' intelligence. While educational policy should provide opportunities to everyone capable of entering university, the individual is responsible to embrace that opportunity.
- An egalitarian view states that the system should bring all students to the same results. In its extreme (controversial) form, it means an equalising of individuals, but in a moderate version it proposes that education institutions support all capacities of students, no matter their social group, meaning that education should be differentiated according to the capacities of each student to make the output as equal as possible.

The perspective on equality of educational opportunities is important because it impacts how a HE system reform should be assessed. For instance, a system based on a liberal approach will favour competition for higher quality, as long as students from less wealthy families have possibilities to enter the system. Reforms in this context will be more driven towards that model than when HE systems are built on a more egalitarian base. It also means that assessing reforms will have to be done within the framework of this policy. This does not mean that the assessment of NPM-based HE system reforms can be reduced solely to the definition made by stakeholders, but that the policy can only be evaluated in the light of the social structure it is part of.

To conclude on NPM

For many researchers, managerialism (e.g., Trowler, 1998) nor NPM (Broucker & De Wit, 2015) have delivered what was hoped for in HE. In a way this is logical as reforms almost never deliver all expected results. When investigating the specific flaws of NPM within HE, it is pivotal to look at the context to be able to fully understand what can, from a system's point of view, be considered as a flaw and what not.

Given the importance of the context of HE system reform, in our view, two aspects are crucial if we want to build a model for the study of HE policy reform. First, the role of HE within society should be at the core of the debate when talking about HE benefits. This role

will be differently defined according to the ideology that guides the opinion of stakeholders, which in its turn depends on three criteria (Trowler, 1998, 2008): (1) does HE lead to the formation of critical citizens or to the training of employable actors; (2) is HE directed by disciplinary content or by transferable skills and (3) does HE serve education or research. Second, the discussion about the benefits should be broad. Next to efficiency and performance (NPM-values), other benefits and aims should be considered, by looking at all objectives defined by the relevant stakeholders, so that it can be assessed whether reforms are aimed at building a HE that is functional for the achievement of those objectives. Taking this into account, we will now propose a new model for the study of HE reform.

PV for HE

PV: the concept

The notion of PV is not new. Though there is some discussion about the exact definition (O'Flynn, 2007), two elements are essential. First, it can be perceived as a set of normative agreements about the rights of citizens; the obligations of citizens to society, the state and one another; and the principles whereupon policy should be based (Bozeman, 2007; Mintrom & Luetjens, 2015). Second, it refers to the contribution the public sector makes to the economic, social and environmental well-being of a society (O'Flynn, 2007). Derived therefrom, the concept contains normativity in policy design and interaction between the stakeholders. Consequently, it implies something that the public is willing to make sacrifices for (Try & Radnor, 2007).

Moore (1995) embeds the notion of PV in what he calls the 'strategic triangle'. His idea is that the creation of PV is the ultimate goal of public sector organisations. Therefore, a public organisation has to meet three tests. It has to create something substantively valuable; it must be politically sustainable and legitimate; and it has to be feasible (Alford & O'Flynn, 2009; Moore, 1995). This will lead to the desired results, with a cost effective provision of high quality services, while maintaining a high level of trust between government and citizens. It is that idea that creates PV (see Figure 2).

PV as alternative to NPM for HE?

PV implies a new way of thinking about government activity, policy-making and service delivery (O'Flynn, 2007). It points to normativity, i.e., engagement, and to interaction and

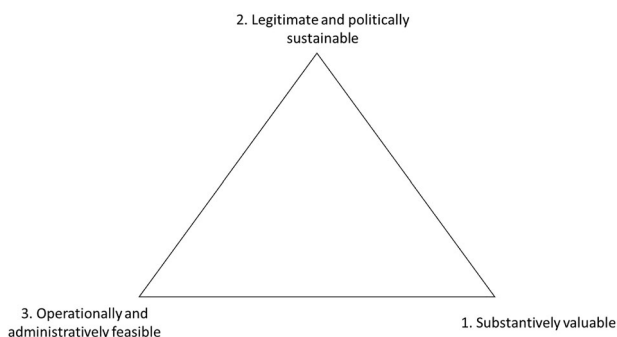


Figure 2. The strategic triangle (Moore, 1995).

collaboration. The NPM-based reforms in HE are accused of taking insufficient account of exactly these two elements, which puts them at the core of the debate if we want to be able to identify flaws of NPM within HE. Consequently, there are various reasons why PV can be an alternative to NPM when looking at HE.

First, with PV it is acknowledged that something such as education cannot be dominated by the efficiency debate. PV would urge managers to focus not only on performance, but also on 'steering networks of providers in the quest for PV creation, creating and maintaining trust, and responding to the preferences of the citizenry' (O'Flynn, 2007, p. 360). As already stated, there is a need to optimise the social benefits of the HE system (Cremonini et al., 2014). PV may be of importance in this debate, because the need for collaboration between universities can be of significant importance in the realisation of those benefits (Cremonini et al., 2014). Instead of focusing on the organisational objectives of efficiency and economy, PV would focus on multiple objectives, broader outcomes, trust and legitimacy (O'Flynn, 2007); in other words, on aims that are not reducible to exclusively monetary notions of benefit (Williams & Shearer, 2011).

Second, PV highlights the divergence between what policy-makers want to achieve and the effects they create through the managers who have to implement that policy (Mintrom & Luetjens, 2015). The same applies to HE, where, for instance, policy at the European level has yielded different outcomes at the national or institutional level, resulting in policy effects that diverge from the intended policy (Broucker & De Wit, 2015; Modugno, Ventin, & Curiel, 2014). PV brings this divergence back into the equation, by emphasising dialogue and diversity of interests, whereas NPM refers to a set of assumedly agreed-upon corporate principles as the most effective way to organisational and policy success. PV stimulates managers to negotiate up into the political scene and out towards clients and citizens, implying that organisations are solicited to understand and articulate their PV aims (O'Flynn, 2007; Williams & Shearer, 2011). This explicitly refers to the former paragraphs where it was argued that stakeholders might have different targets and a different understanding of targets. While NPM has a relatively narrow focus on the objectives, PV puts objectives in a broader perspective, with more dialogue, and with a larger diversity of targets.

Third, PV implies that government activity in the HE sector is more perceived as interconnected and interdependent, because it must be authorised by political actors and other parties in a process of dialogue (Williams & Shearer, 2011). With this, PV counterbalances the criticism on NPM that it is too much internally oriented.

Fourth, PV frames HE system reform and policy within a larger context because it highlights the fact that it is hard to define, implement and evaluate HE policy without taking into account that context. It would place NPM as 'a toolbox' (Broucker & De Wit, 2015) within the governmental context and it would allow one to not only understand choices and impact of policy objectives, but also assess potential economic and social benefits of HE.

Taking this into account, we contend that a PV perspective is a valuable alternative to NPM for two reasons. First, it clarifies that the HE system can achieve other than monetary benefits, because it focuses on the diversity of objectives and the explicit discussion about the role of HE in society. Second, it could help better understand why certain policy fails and why other policy succeeds, because the role of the different stakeholders is acknowledged and because the role of HE is put in perspective of the larger societal context.

PV for HE

To describe the meaning of PV for HE, we use as a starting point O'Flynn's (2007) overview of NPM and PV characteristics (Table 1).

From this table, we derive for the HE system the characteristics PV as a new reform paradigm would imply:

- It would move the neo-liberal discourse of HE system reform towards a system reform where economic and social benefits are at the core (broader outcomes).
- It would highlight the idea that policy objectives within HE should be communicated and discussed with all the stakeholders (legitimacy and trust). This does not necessarily imply that a notion of a liberal university would be left behind, but it would stress the necessity of debate regarding the type of HE. It is obvious that any country wants an efficient system, but that efficiency must serve more objectives than the stipulated performance targets.
- It would mean that the HE system would become accountable, not only towards the government, but equally towards students, faculties, staff and external partners.
- It would stress the necessity of HEIs to work together to achieve the HE objectives without the risk of falling into inter-institutional competition creating spill-over, ineffectiveness and coordination problems.

In other words, PV for HE would imply (1) to define what HE should be offering to the economic, social and environmental well-being of a society (valuable); (2) that a HE system would have to negotiate with all stakeholders about the necessary conditions to achieve those objectives (legitimacy and sustainability) and (3) that the achieved efficiency through NPM should not be left behind (feasibility) but put in a larger context.

Drawing the model

As argued above, HE NPM reforms have been criticised as too narrowly focused on economic principles alone, and have failed to sufficiently take into account the complexity of a differentiated sector such as HE within a socio-economic context. That is one of the

Table 1. Comparative overview (O'Flynn, 2007).

	NPM	Public value
<i>Characterisation</i>	Post-bureaucratic, competitive government	Post-competitive
<i>Dominant focus</i>	Results	Relationships
<i>Managerial goals</i>	Achieve agreed performance targets	Multiple goals including responding to citizen/user preferences, renewing mandate and trust through quality services, steering network
<i>Definition of the public interest</i>	Individual preference are aggregated	Collective preferences are expressed
<i>Performance objective</i>	Management of inputs and outputs to ensure economy and responsiveness to consumers	Multiple objectives are pursued including service outputs, satisfaction, outcomes, trust and legitimacy
<i>Dominant model of accountability</i>	Upward accountability via performance contracts; outwards to customers via market mechanisms	Multiple accountability systems including citizens as overseers of government, customers as users and taxpayers as funders
<i>Preferred system of delivery</i>	Private sector or tightly defined armslength public agency	Menu of alternatives selected pragmatically

reasons why HE, despite reforms inspired by NPM, is still unable to exploit to its maximum its non-economic benefits. We argue that it is not necessarily required to find an alternative to NPM, as some authors argue (Dunleavy et al., 2006), but that it is necessary to include other approaches that provide an added value to the understanding of HE policy. This is also important from a theoretical perspective, as ‘anti-neo-liberalism’ theories have the tendency to become equally monolithic as neo-liberalist theories (Greal & Laurie, 2017). Therefore, we propound the PV approach, not as a competitor to NPM, but as a larger framework wherein NPM is a piece of the puzzle. This framework is presented in Figure 3. It visualises our argumentation, including the differences between PV and NPM, and the position of our research questions.

PV as a larger framework for NPM

In the model, NPM still has its place. It focuses on efficiency and performance (box A in Figure 3), and from that pays attention to what is operationally feasible of a HE policy (box C in Figure 3). For instance: the introduction of performance measurement to determine where efficiency gains can be produced. NPM as a ‘toolbox’ (see above) might result in a HE reform as constituted in a laboratory: trying to optimise the system by injecting ameliorating tools, such as more autonomy to foster creativity, tuition fees to enhance competitiveness, and performance indicators to measure efficiency and effectiveness. PV as a model would consider attention to other crucial elements of HE (see also box A in Figure 3): (1) it would question whether a certain HE policy is legitimate and politically

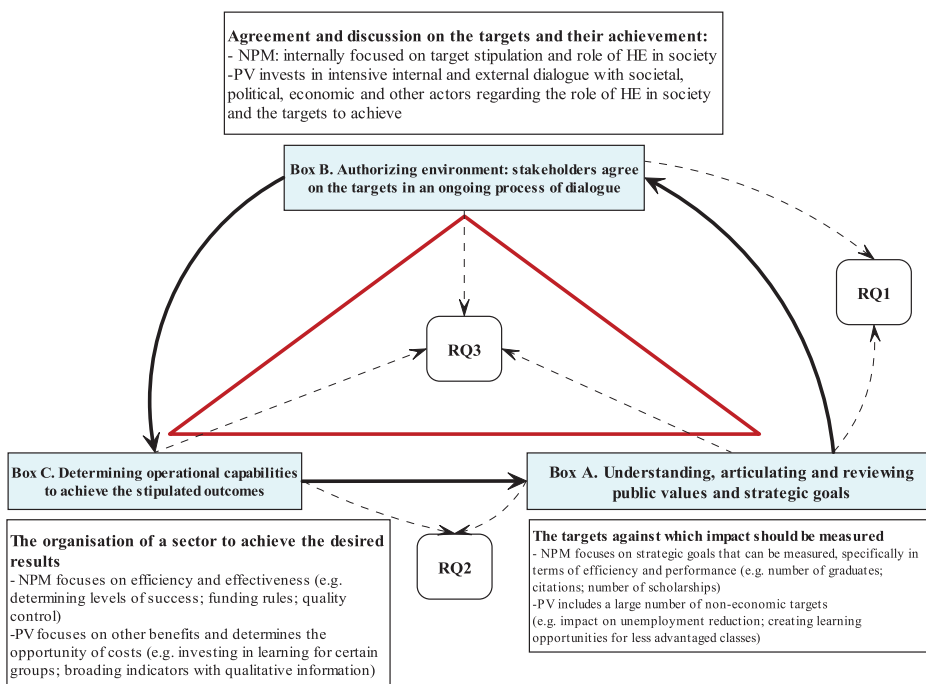


Figure 3. PV as a model for HE.

possible and (2) it would question whether HE contributes to the development of PV. To take the same example: performance will always depend on what is considered to be crucial for HE. If HE is about creating possibilities for all layers of society (see Husen, 1972), lacks in performance cannot be other than ‘part of the policy’. On the contrary, if a HEI is built as an elite institution, with high tuition fees and low levels of student failure, performance may be high, but its democratic level is limited, even though elite universities claim that they provide sufficient possibilities for disadvantaged students. This has been confirmed by other authors claiming that admission to HE is class-biased (Armstrong & Massé, 2014; Frances, 2015; Handel, 2015; Savas, 2016).

PV thus questions the meaning of performance and links that meaning to what is believed HE should do. Consequently, a performance lack could be defined with more accuracy because it would be known that in one case that ‘lack’ was expected, while in the other case it would be dysfunctional and thus should be remedied. That context determines what the role of performance measurement is and what objectives it can or cannot reach. It will also allow a better assessment of the results.

Referring to Moore, we argue that NPM has focused to a large extent on one of the three angles, i.e., feasibility. The other two have been somehow neglected. It is our argument that for the future of HE it will be crucial to pay considerably more attention to the two other dimensions. In order to do so, the stakeholders are of great importance. Try and Radnor (2007) have argued that to create PV, policy-makers have to look for the appropriate services, trusted by the relevant stakeholders, who believe that these services will deliver the expected outcomes. It should be stressed that the judgement of the stakeholders does not only play a role in defining the PV an organisation is striving for, but it also depends on the judgement of the stakeholders whether a PV is legitimate and politically sustainable, and whether the action to attain a PV is administratively feasible (Moore, 1995).

The role of stakeholders for the future of HE

What Moore (1995, 2013) calls ‘the authorising environment’ is close to what is called a stakeholder system. In this authorising environment, Moore distinguishes formal authorities from informal authorities (e.g., interest groups). Like for other sectors, the stakeholders in HE policy are numerous (Chapleo & Simms, 2010). To know the content of the PVs delivered by HE policy, it is necessary to attain a reliable picture of the stakeholders involved, and the varying organisational and authority positions of these stakeholders at the different moments of decision-making. Indeed, the authority of stakeholders might change over time. This also explains why PVs are not static and should best be the subject of longitudinal studies.

Stakeholders are important for defining PVs, but this does not mean that they can do this unlimitedly, as they live in a society where customs, ethical and legal rules, language, value patterns and norms guide social interaction. Although these structures also can change, they nevertheless give society a stability that might limit the freedom of stakeholders to define PVs.

Stakeholders find and/or define PVs in different places and sources, e.g., in literature, public opinion polls, official reports of the government, the media, daily social interaction and so on (Bozeman & Sarewitz, 2011; Moore, 2013). Important sources are the constitution and the law. Although these rules might weigh heavily on the behaviour of the

actors, Bozeman and Sarewitz (2011) contend that they reflect or express PVs, ‘rather than establishing them’.

The model of PV invites policy-makers and researchers to look for the outcomes of HE policy as they are expected from the PVs, expressed by the stakeholders (box B in Figure 3). This implies that, for instance, results of HE policy cannot simply be expressed in terms of costs per student, but attention should be paid to the positional definition of the results by the different stakeholders. Although all stakeholders are bound by legal principles, it is – in the context of a PV approach – possible that these legal principles are differently interpreted depending on the different concepts of equality of educational opportunities and the measures taken to guarantee this equality. Moreover, the results will be differently interpreted depending on the position of the stakeholder in the HE policy decision-making chain. A member of parliament belonging to the opposition might give a different assessment of the HE policy to a vice-chancellor, a lecturer or a student union. Although differences will exist between the evaluations of the stakeholders, all stakeholders will, either explicitly or implicitly, evaluate HE policy.

By taking the stakeholders’ standpoints to define the HE objectives, instead of seeing only efficiency as the core target, a richer picture of HE policy can be drawn. Since many stakeholders are involved in HE policy, a great variety of objectives has to be considered, and this includes a great variety of responsibilities of the different stakeholders. One should also be aware that the performance objectives might differ between the stakeholders, and more attention should be paid to the satisfaction level of all those concerned. If this is so, accountability should also be different for all parties concerned.

To get a reliable picture about the role of HE in society it is necessary not to stop at the definitions given by policy-makers and managers of HE, but to look at all the definitions that live among all stakeholders involved. This means that in our globalised society international stakeholders should be part of this observation, as they seem to have a growing impact on national HE policy (Broucker & De Wit, 2015; Verhoeven & Zhang, 2013). As a result, the idea of collaboration between stakeholders within HE will need to be broader than the already existing collaboration that is mainly used for performance or academic output (Macfarlane, 2017).

To conclude

The model we propose, based on PV, can be of added value to look at policy of and reforms in the HE sector. Over the years HE reform has been inspired by the NPM approach, but scholars as well as policy-makers have meanwhile concluded that NPM did not deliver exactly what was hoped for. In our argumentation this is due to the narrow focus NPM has, both on the objectives of HE and on the role HE should have in a socio-economic context. PV broadens our view by incorporating NPM within a larger framework, taking more objectives of HE into account, and putting HE back into its larger context. This implies that the debate on HE should be made more explicit and that stakeholders should be more involved – contrary to current practice (Modugno et al., 2014). This also implies, for future research, that the focus should be shifted to other questions than those deemed important in recent years, that is, to questions pertaining to the other parts of the strategic triangle:

- (1) What is the perception of stakeholders about the role of HE within society? This question would allow us to assess what the PVs attached to HE are.
- (2) How do stakeholders perceive the results of former reforms?
- (3) What explains the gap between desired PVs and achieved NPM-related reform outcomes?

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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