



# Has the public good of higher education been emptied out? The case of England

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## Abstract

In Anglophone neoliberal jurisdictions, policy highlights the private goods associated with higher education but largely neglects the sector's contributions to public good not measurable as economic values, including non-pecuniary individual benefits and collective social outcomes. Governments are silent on the existence and funding of most public goods. The paper reports on understandings of the public good role of higher education in England after nearly a decade of full marketisation. The study, part of a cross-national comparison of 11 countries, consisted of a review of major policy reports, and 24 semi-structured interviews in universities (13) and among higher education policy professionals (11) including regulators, national organisations and experts. England has no policy language for talking about outcomes of higher education other than attenuated performative outputs such as graduate salaries, research impact, knowledge exchange and widening participation, understood as individual access to education as a private good. Awareness of multiple public goods has been suppressed to justify successive fee increases and the imposition of a market in the centralised English system. This has coincided with a shift from direct government funding and collaborative stewardship by state and institutions, to student funding and top-down regulation. Nevertheless, most interviewees, including regulators, advocated an open-ended public good role and provided many examples of public goods in higher education, though the concepts lacked clarity. The policy notion of a zero-sum relation of private and public outcomes, corresponding to the split of private/public costs, was rejected in favour of a positive-sum relation of private and public outcomes.

**Keywords** Higher education · Public good · Common good · Collective benefit · Public and private goods · Higher education policy · Educational financing · England

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## Introduction

What does higher education achieve beyond the provision of benefits for individuals as augmented earnings and opportunities for work, career and social position? How do we understand the public or common good in this sector, including its contributions that are experienced collectively as well as severally (Marginson et al., 2023)? What is the relation between public goods and private goods in and through higher education?

There is a diversity of answers to these difficult questions, governed by varying histories and assumptions about human nature, society and the state. Practices of higher education are context-specific and meanings of ‘public’, or its nearest lexical equivalents (Yang, 2022) diverge. There are also overlaps and commonalities. Both the differences and similarities can be instructive. Since 2016, the UK-based Centre for Global Higher Education has researched higher education and public good in seven countries: Japan (Huang et al., 2022), China (Tian & Liu, 2019), South Korea (Mun & Min, 2022), France (Carpentier & Courtois, 2022), Finland (Brewis, 2023), England within the UK and Canada. There have been parallel studies, using similar interview questions, in Poland (Szadkowski, 2021), Chile (Guzmán-Valenzuela et al., 2020; Simburger & Guzmán-Valenzuela, 2020), Russia and Australia. A first synthesising paper compares the Anglophone and Chinese domains (Marginson & Yang, 2022).

In each country, the study has consisted of (a) review of relevant national policies and (b) semi-structured interviews, in two contrasting universities, one more globally active, and among policy makers and in some countries experts on higher education.

This paper reports on the study in the nation of England within the United Kingdom (UK). The policy review tracked the evolution of official thinking about public good(s) in higher education in selected reports: Robbins (1963), Dearing (1997a), Browne (2010) and Augar (2019). There were 24 semi-structured interviews in higher education institutions and with policy professionals, including policy makers and regulators, leaders of national higher education organisations, and academic experts. Approaches to education and public good vary between the four UK nations (Callender, 2023): it is important to recognise that the case study evidence pertains almost solely to England, which has 84.3% of UK population. Universities 1 and 2 are England based. Though the policy professionals had a UK remit all but one, a professor based in Wales, worked in England. Discussion focused on public good, higher education financing and government-university relations in England alone. The case study is properly labelled ‘England’ not ‘UK’, hence the title.

The next section of the paper reviews relevant concepts of ‘public’ and the public/private relation, focusing on Anglophone usage. This is followed by the findings of the England study. First, the paper traces the evolution of policy approaches to public good and private/public goods in the four successive policy reports. Second, it presents insights from the 24 semi-structured interviews. Discussion and conclusions follow.

## Public good and public/private goods

Public good and public/private relations is a vast topic and a full review is not attempted (but see Marginson (2007, 2011, 2016, 2018) and Marginson and Yang (2022)). The paper begins with concepts and relations specific to the Euro-American (‘Western’), Anglophone and English domains. The objective is not to install the Western ideas as universal. The

contrary is the case. The objective is to provincialize those ideas to understand why public good, and the public/private dualism in economics and education financing, are what they are in England.

## Western and Anglophone approaches

Despite episodic forays into absolutism, the core tradition of Euro-American governance is the division of powers. This is the legacy of distributed agency in Republican Rome, the post-Roman division of church and state, the autonomous medieval cities and merchants, law and electoral politics both outside and joined to the executive, and the participatory public domain (Scheidel, 2015). The key moment was the Enlightenment's repudiation of feudal authority. In Britain, Adam Smith sought to constrain the state while enlarging the space for both civil association (Smith, 2002/1759) and market (Smith, 1937/1776), though the line between them was unclear and each overlapped with household/individual. The French revolution of 1789–1794 foregrounded the assembly of citizens and a larger public role for the republican state than for the limited Anglophone state. There are differences within Euro-America, and between the Anglophone nations, but it is sufficient to note that Anglophone society is divided between government-as-state with coercive powers, potent within limits; the economic market; a variable civil society; and the individual with ill-defined normative primacy. The state is divided between the executive, legislature and judiciary. The boundaries between the state and other sectors are tense and contested.

Within the evolving division of powers, legal incorporation of the medieval university established a space of partial autonomy between church and state for universalising scholarship, and, later, science. When modern governments built national universities and regulated their autonomy, the sector referenced the Humboldtian ideal, whereby the university served the state on the basis of freedom to teach, learn and research (Anderson, 2004). US public universities, while partly dependent on state funding and servants of the economy, were also positioned as civic institutions and self-serving market actors. In today's England, it is unclear the extent to which higher education institutions are creatures of the state, civil society, both or neither. 'The idea of the public university is ... rather imprecise' (Holmwood, 2017, p. 927). English policy has now imposed a business model that defines universities as private corporations, though they enjoy charity status, and unlike most private corporations are seen as the property of citizens and publicly accountable. In short, their autonomy vis-à-vis the state is perpetually ambiguous and problematic (Scott, 2021).

## Prevailing notions of 'public'

In English-speaking discourse of 'public', and the contrasting of public and 'private', the meanings are multiple, diverse and confusing. The Shorter Oxford Dictionary entry for 'public' and its applications occupies 45 cm (SOED, 1991). Arguably, there are three primary meanings (Marginson, 2011; Marginson & Yang, 2022). These are (1) a shared if not universal beneficence, virtue or prospect in the social realm, as in '*the public good*'; (2) 'public' as a descriptive adjective, not excluding 'private', signifying open and inclusive social-communicative relations, as in 'public opinion' and 'the public sphere'; and (3) the dualistic pairing of 'public' with 'private' as an analytical device, in which they are zero-sum parts of a social or economic whole in which each excludes the other.

**The public good** In higher education, the normative ‘public good’ (Mansbridge, 1998) refers to provision and practices that advance the common interest, shared value or the development of society. For Biesta (2012), public in education refers to ‘the achievement of a form of human togetherness in which ... action is possible and freedom can appear’ (p. 693). Nevertheless, while claims about *the* public good have rhetorical power, they rest on an illusion of singularity and universality. Common value has many possible interpretations; and access to shared public benefits, however understood, is unequal. For example, citizens with social or economic power tend to gain more from high-quality free public universities. The much heralded public good role of the US land grant universities rests on the dispossession of indigenous inhabitants (Stein, 2022). In Anglophone political cultures, the key questions are unresolved: what is public good and by whom is it secured? The state has the only general mandate but there is scepticism about the claim of the state to embody the public good. There is no guarantee that it will broadly interpret and practice the public good, which can refer variously to distributional equality in provision, universal inclusion, accountability for taxpayer funds or neutral competition between non-state actors. Governments often present economic growth or prosperity, or global competitiveness, as master public goods, without simultaneously considering social welfare, socio-economic equity or human rights.

Some focus on the ‘common good’ as distinct from ‘public good’. The traditional ‘commons’ signified a shared resource with no ownership barrier, such as a village field or river, though common pool resources can be subject to congestion (Ostrom, 1990). UNESCO (2015) has developed the notion of education as a ‘global common good’ (Locatelli, 2019), grounded in ideas of solidarity, inclusion, tolerance, universal freedoms, equality and individual rights from European civic democracy. Both state and private organisations may contribute to furthering this common good. Tian and Liu (2019) find that common good in higher education is more explanatory than public good because of the ambiguities of ‘public’. However, the common good has yet to enter mainstream Anglophone policy conversations.

**The communicative public sphere** The second notion of ‘public’ refers to the broad inclusive assembly (*the* public, public opinion) or open communications (‘going public’, public media, public relations). This relational public, networking the private individuals, is a synonym for ‘society’. It shades into the commercially constructed public of the privately owned mass media, Internet platforms and social media, which shape society from above, but also has scope for democratic agency from below. Habermas (1989) takes the relational communicative public further as the critical ‘public sphere’, ‘the space of communication of ideas and projects that emerge from society and are addressed to the decision makers in the institutions of society’ (Castells, 2008, p. 78; Fraser, 1990). Calhoun (1992) and Pusser (2011) extend the public sphere idea to the university, a semi-autonomous adjunct of state that harbours constructive criticism of the state, new policy ideas and transformative social movements. For Ignatieff (2018), within the division of powers a critically minded university is a counter to majoritarian populism, like free media and an independent judiciary.

The idea of the relational public animates agents in higher education—it underpins access programmes—but the critical public sphere rarely enters state policy. One such exceptional case is New Zealand where legislation identifies universities as ‘conscience and critics’ of society.

**The public/private dualism** The third kind of ‘public’, in the private/public dualism, has two heterogeneous forms (Marginson, 2018). The political-judicial ‘public’ means state or government, as in ‘public sector’, which is distinct from the private home, family, market

and corporation—for example, national, state or public universities are distinguished by their legal ownership from ‘private’ universities. The second dualistic meaning of public/private is from economics (Samuelson, 1954). Here, productive activity in education is seen as economic activity, and in a capitalist society all economic activity is or should be realised as market transactions and private goods. However, some goods are subject to market failure because their production cannot generate profit: they are non-excludable, because the benefits are not confined to single buyers (e.g. clean air regulation); and/or non-rivalrous because they can be consumed by any number of people without being depleted (e.g. a mathematical theorem sustains its value indefinitely. These are public goods.

In popular usage, the political and economic dualisms are often conflated. Private/public is reworked as market versus state. This is misleading. It hides private non-market production as in households, and obscures the state-controlled, regulated and subsidised quasi-markets favoured by neoliberal policy. But market/state correlates with the faultline between non-state and state in Anglophone political culture. The market/state polarity is ideologically resilient, continually recurring, with each and every move from the state to market exchange seen as a step into liberty. Marx’s comment was ‘it is not individuals who are set free by free competition, it is, rather, capital which is set free’ (Marx, 1973/1858, p. 92).

Many scholars conceive ‘public’ without a zero-sum public/private trade-off. For example, Nancy Fraser (1990) argues that ‘a tenable conception of the public sphere would countenance not the exclusion, but the inclusion, of interests and issues’ labelled as ‘private’ (p. 77). Here, the public good is a container for incubating the private good, and private and public good may advance at the same time. But in the Anglophone economic policy mainstream, collective goals are achieved only through strenuous political effort. The UK’s post World War II welfare state was an accumulation of such efforts, culminating in the universal National Health Service free at the point of delivery which still (only just) survives. The evolution of higher education has been different. The present paper focuses on the zero-sum public/private approach installed in England in the neoliberal economic era.

## Public/private goods in higher education

In Samuelson’s (1954) economic definition, all goods are market-generated private goods unless they are public goods subject to market failure, in which case they must be financed by government or philanthropy. This maximises the space for potential market production and exchange in higher education while reducing the state to a residual role. Only in basic research there is an unambiguous case for public financing based on market failure.

Higher education can be organised on the basis of free access to education of good quality, moving historically towards universal access, as in the Nordic jurisdictions (Brewis, 2023); on the basis of market production and exchange, as in the USA and England today; or as a mixture of the two approaches. It is a policy choice. However, Samuelson’s formula naturalises that policy choice. It creates a *prima facie* bias in favour of marketisation by building it into the analytical categories—by definition education is marketised unless that is impossible—while gifting government with a rationale for minimising both the scope of their public responsibilities and their expenditure. Samuelson’s economics have three other implications that frame the Anglophone policy field, notwithstanding the differences in provision between the English-speaking systems. First, higher education is always transactional, financing in exchange for services, even the government funding of public goods.

In the case of some public goods, the concept of transaction is meaningless (what is the economic value of climate science?) but these goods have no place in Samuelson world. Second, the zero-sum relation between private and public goods is rigorously observed: mission, activity and benefits are *either* private or public in nature. They cannot be positive-sum, public and private at the same time. Third, there is a tight correspondence nexus between on one hand the definition of mission and activity in higher education, the ‘goods’ or benefits it provides (private or public), and on the other its funding (private or public). Higher education should be publicly funded only to the extent it is a minimal public good.

Neoliberal governments (Olssen & Peters, 2005) model higher education as a quasi-market competition between institutions, ordered by price signals and/or status orders created by calibration exercises like research assessment and university ranking. A zero-sum dualism of private and public goods is mapped onto private/public costs, or vice versa. Student places are modelled as economic commodities. In some nations, calculations of the rates of return associated with degrees are used to determine tuition fees (Chapman et al., 2014). Research knowledge is also imagined as economically valuable commodities—projects, publications, copyrights and patents are all product formats—though nominally, basic research with no predicted commercial spinoffs is funded as a Samuelson public good.

Neoliberal governments routinely emphasise the private pecuniary benefits and ‘employability’ and subordinate common or collective social outcomes. No government applies Samuelson in full (Marginson, 2013). As noted, the socially inclusive ‘public’ has resonance in education and governments subsidise individual opportunity (understood as access to private goods) via student grants or loans and assist those from under-represented groups. There are also policy gestures towards ill-defined ‘third stream’, ‘engagement’ or ‘impact’ activity. However, these latter domains are treated primarily as responsibilities of institutional providers rather than duties of the state as part of a broad public good remit.

Hence, the abiding weakness of this policy framing is that under-plays all contributions, effects and values in higher education that are not defined as Samuelson private goods. This domain is much larger than suggested by Samuelson’s residual category of minimum necessary transactional public goods. It includes the non-pecuniary effects of education for individual students such as self-formation through engagement in knowledge and the augmentation of reflexive agency and sociability. It also includes the many impacts of the sector in collective social relations, like the population-wide fostering of literacy and technological capabilities, public health, compliance with law and enhanced political connectedness; tolerance of difference, international relations; economy-building and society-building in regions and cities; and so on. There is much research on these effects of higher education (for an economic summary, see McMahon (2018)). But in Anglophone neoliberal policy, these outcomes are mostly not identified as policy objectives. Most of the sector’s contributions to the public, common and collective fall off the policy template. These public good outcomes are real but under-recognised and so under-provided.

## Findings 1: Policy review

### Higher education and government in England

The UK is a constitutional monarchy governed by the top-down sovereignty transferred from monarch to parliament after the seventeenth century civil war, not sovereignty from below (Ascherson, 2023; Keay, 2022). This contrasts with Western European polities with

traditions of decentralisation in governance, like Germany or Italy. Again unlike many European democracies, but akin to the two-party USA, the ‘winner take all’ UK electoral system favours single-party government rather than coalitions. While in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, the devolved administrations provide some relief from top-down control, in England the distinction between larger and smaller nation is inconsequential. Governance is highly centralised in Westminster, the political head and Whitehall, the administrative head.

The prime minister dominates politics and the Treasury, which synchronises the state with the capitalist economy, leads social as well as economic policy. It is the paradox of English liberalism writ large: the centralising state is the limited liberal state of Adam Smith, yet a controlling state that creates the market from which it separates itself. It readily implements a singular approach to the public good as a monarchist gift from above, not a communal good that is fashioned below. There is local bottom-up cooperation but in governance it is subordinated by class rule in which capital accumulation trumps social alleviation. Higher education intermittently connects to localities but is more decisively shaped by centralising economic policy and national regulation (Shattock & Horvath, 2019, 2023).

Treasury presides over an economy that is moderately wealthy and highly unequal. In 2021, the UK’s 67.0 million people had a GDP per capita of USD \$46,510, compared to \$51,204 in Germany and \$38,411 across the European Union (EU) (World Bank, 2023). Of the 41 European NUTS 2 regions in the UK in 2017, ten regions had per capita incomes of less than 80% of the EU average, while West London at 626% of the EU average was by far the richest region in Europe (EU, 2023). Higher education is also highly stratified. UK researchers are strong in global science, with 6.3% of global publications and 10.5% of citations in 2020 (UUK, 2023), and England had four of the top 20 universities as measured by high citation papers (Leiden University 2023), but educational participation and research drop away sharply in the poorer regions. Private costs in higher education are high, actualising the market model. Domestic students pay an annual £9250 supported by income contingent loans. In 2021–2022, the 23.8% of students who were from outside the UK provided 19.0% of institutional income (HESA, 2023). This capital accumulation was especially concentrated in the 24 research-intensive universities in the Russell Group.

Among the four UK nations, England is unique in the extent to which policy on higher education and public good is determined by economic ideas (Scott, 2021). With the advent of neoliberal policy in the 1980s/1990s, the Samuelson (1954) approach to public and private goods captured Treasury thinking, as shown by the trajectory of the major policy reports.

## Selected policy reports

As Scott (2021) notes, the vast majority of official statements and reports have little weight, but there have been a small number of major documents (Shattock, 2012). The present study has selected the Robbins (1963) report, the Dearing (1997a) report and the Browne (2010) report. To bring the inquiry closer to the present, the Augar (2019) report was added. It was less of a watershed but again provides a window into the mind of government.

Through all UK policy regimes, from the welfare state of 1945–1975 to neoliberal high capitalism, the educational, social and economic weight of higher education has grown, albeit unevenly, but the shaping discourses and rationales have changed. One constant is that the terms ‘public good’ and ‘public goods’ appear in none of the reports.

The approach to public good(s) must be inferred from other contents. The term ‘public’ is used sparingly, mostly to refer to funding, or the communicative inclusive public, or the state as locus of the public interest.

**Robbins 1963** The 1963 Robbins Report introduced and normalised the principle that all qualified students who aspired to higher education should be able to enter. Beneath its largely practical discussion lays a vision of higher education without limit, like Virgil’s Rome, as summarised in the last sentence: higher education ‘is an essential condition for the realisation in the modern age of the ideals of a free and democratic society’ (Robbins, 1963, p. 267). Shattock (2012) remarks that Robbins ignited a latent idealism even at Treasury (p. 141). Significantly, however, it explicitly rejected the later Treasury formula. It did not see public and private goods as zero-sum. Within higher education as a public good individuals secured both pecuniary and non-pecuniary gains and society also benefitted. Nor did it tie its judgement about the mixed public and private outcomes of higher education to a funding split. Government funded both the public and the private outcomes. The report rejected fees and student loans. ‘It is a bad thing ... for young people to emerge with a load of debt’, it stated. ‘The connection between higher education and earning power can be over-stressed’. Loans would discourage participation (Robbins, 1963, pp. 211–212).

Though Robbins regarded higher education as matter ‘of great public concern’ (p. 5) and an important responsibility of government, it was a light regulator. Institutions should enjoy ‘the maximum of independence’ compatible with a modest level of necessary central control (p. 230). They ‘must be free to experiment without limitations’ (p. 9). This kind of autonomy was not universally agreed in government, and after Robbins financial controls began to accumulate (Shattock, 2012, pp. 236–242).

**Dearing 1997** The 1997 Dearing committee met at a time of transition, with growing advocacy of neoliberal business and market models. The committee itself was markedly education-centric and moderately social democratic and conceived higher education in large terms as an open ongoing multi-strand engagement with government, society and economy of a public good kind. The purposes of higher education were to enable the development of persons, to expand knowledge, ‘to serve the needs’ of the economy, and ‘to play a major role in shaping a democratic, civilised, inclusive society’. It should ‘enable society to make progress through an understanding of itself and its world’ (Dearing, 1997a, p. 72). Institutions played a large social role for ‘a wide constituency of interests’ (p. 347). Passages such as these secured a strong and continuing constituency for Dearing within higher education.

All of this was undermined by another and ultimately more important message. The Dearing committee proposed tuition fees financed by income-contingent student loans in the free English system. To justify this epochal change, it framed a Treasury-friendly narrative that defined higher education as economic not social, conflicting with the rest of the report; saw the economic outcomes as private and market based; and linked this to financing. Private benefits were correlated with private financing. It was the first major statement of the transactional Samuelson argument that was to dominate ministerial discourse:

There is overwhelming evidence that those with higher education qualifications are the main beneficiaries from higher education in the form of improved employment prospects and pay... graduates in employment should make a greater contribution to the costs of higher education in the future. While we believe the

economy as a whole, and those who employ graduates, are also substantial beneficiaries, even though these benefits have proved elusive to quantify, the greatest benefit accrues to graduates themselves (Dearing, 1997a, pp. 288–289).

The Dearing report hoped that funding a proportion of tuition through students would render institutions more ‘responsive to student requirements’ (Dearing 1997b, pp. 36–37), foreshadowing the later student-as-consumer. Institutions should ‘strive constantly for value for money’ (Dearing, 1997a, p. 348). This reasoning rested on the courageous assumption that the earnings of graduates resulted from their higher education, not their social backgrounds and networks, but this was little questioned then or later. What the argument about private goods meant for the broad social role that the committee had discussed in non-transactional terms was not spelled out. It did not try to square the circle.

The report was less concerned than Robbins about institutional autonomy but endorsed funding councils as intermediaries between minister and institution (Dearing, 1997a, p. 348).

**Browne 2010** In 1998, the then Labour government introduced a £1000 tuition fee without Dearing’s income contingent loan repayment mechanism. In 2005, it applied the loans scheme along with a fee hike to £3000. Labour subsequently established an inquiry into fees and funding which reported after a Conservative Party led Coalition government was elected. The Browne (2010) report proposed the largest transformation since Robbins. It squared the circle by modelling the whole field of activity as an economic market.

Like Dearing, Browne began by couching the role of higher education in large social and cultural terms: ‘Higher education ... helps to create the knowledge, skills and values that underpin a civilised society’ (p. 14). However, this broad role was not further defined, and the report followed this passage with discussion of the pecuniary benefits for individuals, and economic calculations of the value of those benefits (pp. 14–15). Browne moved English higher education from mixed private/public funding to a universal quasi-market with reduced public funding and full price tuition fees, supported by income-contingent loans repaid in the workplace. Erstwhile public outcomes would be financed by individualised tuition. ‘With public resources now limited, new investment will have to come from those who directly benefit from higher education’, stated the Browne committee (p. 25).

This meant that student consumers would have a vested interest in minimisation of all collective outcomes of no direct value to them as individuals. The Samuelson zero-sum logic was structured into consumer incentives. A modified Browne scheme was implemented in 2012. Direct funding of most student places was withdrawn. Government continued to finance participation by subsidising unpaid loans, amounting to a third or more of the debt, providing political protection for the quasi-market while maintaining its ideological facade.

The journey from Robbins to Browne swapped private funding for public funding and largely set aside the public good role of higher education. Robbins had expected government to carry the cost of both private and public benefits. Browne advocated the individualised private funding of public benefits. Nevertheless, it rested on a rhetorical sleight-of-hand. Whereas the economic justification for solely private funding was grounded in the claim that the benefits of higher education were largely private, the underlying political logic was the reverse of this. It was the Treasury desire to introduce and then increase tuition fees that had powered the shift in the definition of the outcomes, from a public/private mix to largely private. The vision was adjusted to finance not vice versa.

**Augar 2019** In 2018, the government completed the transition to a market model. It abolished the intermediary funding council that had long articulated relations between minister and institutions, creating an Office for Students (OFS) with ‘powers to intervene on a risk-based basis’ in institutions ‘with the objective of promoting competition and choice and looking after the student interest’ (Augar, 2019, p. 63). Just prior to the OFS in 2017, the government created a Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) that calibrated institutional performance using comparative graduate salaries and student satisfaction surveys, focusing attention on private pecuniary benefits and positioning students as consumers. It also pursued limited public outcomes in selected areas: the Research Excellence Framework (REF) incentivised research with social ‘impact’, the Knowledge Exchange Framework (KEF) focused institutions’ attentions on both social and economic partners, and institutions were required to enhance student participation from under-enrolled social groups and regions.

It was a shift from planning to regulation, and from arms-length funding to reduced public investment with direct ministerial control. Institutions, not government, were now responsible for the individual and collective benefits of higher education. Government generated data that informed the student-as-consumer and determined provider conduct and efficiency. It paralleled the English government of privatised power, water and rail.

The Augar committee was asked to make recommendations on student tuition and loans. It worked within the Treasury model. It focused on ‘enhancing value for money’ in a system that ‘incentivises choice and competition’ (p. 65). ‘Value’ was defined by individual pecuniary benefits. Non-pecuniary benefits for persons, and collective benefits for society, were omitted. Though in passing the report noted the ‘considerable civic contribution of universities’ (p. 64), it did not generalise about the contributions of higher education as had Dearing and Browne. Only one boxed paragraph provided a glimpse of something larger:

Successful outcomes for both students and society are about more than pay. Higher levels of education are associated with wider participation in politics and civic affairs, and better physical and mental health. We also understand the social value of some lower-earning professions such as nursing and social care, and the cultural value of studying the Arts and Humanities. The earnings data enable us to make economically defined value calculations, not value judgements. Assessing this wider value is very difficult but government should continue to work to ensure that wider considerations are taken into account in its policy and funding decisions (Augar, 2019, p. 87).

That was as far as it went. The Augar committee knew higher education generated public goods and its ‘wider value’ should be recognised but had no idea how to do it.

The Augar report’s irresolution showed that mainstream English policy no longer had the tools for imagining, investigating or enhancing the public good role of higher education. It lacked a language of public good. The clarity and inclusive confidence of Robbins, and the breadth and diversity of Dearing, had vanished. This lack of a policy language showed itself also in the semi-structured research interviews with universities, policy makers and others.

## Findings 2: Interviews with practitioners and policy professionals

In 2017, 13 semi-structured interviews were conducted in two higher education institutions (six in university 1, a London-based global research institution, and seven in provincial research university 2) with university leaders, middle manager-leaders and professors. In

2021, there were 11 interviews with people who could be called ‘higher education policy professionals’: current or former policy makers and/or regulators (3), leaders of national higher education organisations (3), one person in both groups (1) and academic experts on the research topic (4). An anonymised list of interviewees is provided in Table 1.

The policy framework was similar in 2017 and 2021. In 2017, the TEF was operational and the OFS had been announced, though it did not open until 1 January 2018.

The 24 interviews were audio recorded and professionally transcribed. The proposed research was assessed by the Research Ethics Committee of the Department of Education at the University of Oxford (clearance CIA-21-270). Interview data were coded and analysed on an inductive basis, within four broad deductive categories framed as research questions:

- Concepts and inclusions under the term ‘public good’;
- Contributions of higher education and research to public good, or public goods;
- The roles and limits of government and institutions, respectively, in higher education, and the relations between them;
- Global public good in higher education and research.

Answers to the first three questions are reported in this paper. English responses concerning higher education and global public good will be published separately.

The purposive sample of 24 cannot enable conclusive differentiation but there are interesting patterns. Regional university 2 focused more than London global university 1 on local outreach and regional mission, and was more troubled in balancing global, national and local agendas (U-12, U-13). There were only modest variations of outlook by discipline. Two of the economically trained were close to the Treasury line but other economically trained interviewees expressed views similar to the non-economically trained. The policy makers differentiated sharply from other interviewees on the role of government but not much on other issues.

## Understandings of public good

There was no single understanding among the English interviewees of the ‘public good’, or ‘public goods’ as distinct from ‘private goods’. All the Anglophone meanings of ‘public’ discussed above entered the interviews and there were significant ambiguities, tensions and outright contradictions in and between the responses. However, very few answers coincided with the perspectives and concepts of Browne (2010) and Augar (2019). More than half of the interviewees developed an expansive, ill-defined domain of public action or relations.

The public good is something that ... transcends individual utility, individual perspective, and provides some benefit for society as a whole ... that means all of us, independently of whether we individually get benefit.

(U-6, mid-level manager-leader, university 1, computing)

The public good was ‘matters beneficial to citizens in the broadest sense’ (P-8, also P-9). Going deeper, a senior university manager equated public good with ‘relational goods’ that contributed to ‘peace, prosperity and security’ (U-2). One policy maker referred to ‘the territory of connections ... the ecosystem between universities and public services, and industries and communities’ (P-1). A professor of political economy referred to the communicative ‘public domain’ that included universities, the media and political system, ‘where we reflect, as a society, on the rules that we wish to govern ourselves with’ (U-4).

**Table 1** Semi-structured interviews

Interview number	Type	Position	Gender	Discipline of origin
U-1	University I	Mid-level manager-leader	Male	Literature
U-2	University I	Senior-level manager-leader	Female	Arts
U-3	University I	Senior-level manager-leader	Male	Medicine
U-4	University I	Faculty member (professor)	Male	Political economy
U-5	University I	Mid-level manager-leader	Female	Public policy
U-6	University I	Mid-level manager-leader	Male	Computer Science
U-7	University II	Senior-level manager-leader	Female	English literature and drama
U-8	University II	Mid-level manager-leader r	Male	Music
U-9	University II	Faculty member (professor)	Female	Economics
U-10	University II	Mid-level manager-leader	Female	Epidemiology
U-11	University II	Mid-level manager-leader	Male	Archaeology
U-12	University II	Senior-level manager-leader	Male	Medicine
U-13	University II	Faculty member (professor)	Male	History
P-1	Government agency	Policy maker and regulator	Male	
P-2	Government agency	Policy maker and regulator	Male	
P-3	National organisation	Previous policy maker	Male	
P-4	National organisation	Previous policy maker and current leader of organisation	Male	
P-5	National organisation	Leader of organisation	Male	
P-6	National organisation	Leader of organisation	Female	
P-7	National organisation	Leader of organisation	Female	
P-8	University	Expert on higher education and policy	Male	Economic geography
P-9	University	Expert on higher education and policy	Male	Higher education
P-10	University	Expert on higher education and policy	Male	Economics and Education
P-11	University	Expert on higher education and policy	Female	Economics and Education

Source: Interviews by Aline Courtois (in 2017), Simon Marginson (in 2017 and 2021) and Lili Yang (in 2021). U-1 to U-13 interviewed face to face in 2017; P-1 to P-11 online in 2021

Other interviewees focused on the state: ‘public good ... that’s what governments are there for’ (P-9). This rendered the public good ‘a democratic principle’ (P-9), one ‘subject to public debate about what is in the public interest’ (P-7). The public good was also associated with the public sector. One senior university manager-leader was emphatic that public institutions like universities and the NHS could be efficient, productive and innovative (U-3).

Some drew on economic concepts like externalities (U-4) and market failure when using the term ‘public’. ‘The public good is delivering things that private endeavour, investment, the market, are not able to deliver’ (P-1). But as discussed further below, there was almost universal resistance to the either/or notion of zero-sum public and private outcomes. ‘Very often public goods and private goods go hand in hand with one another’ (P-4, also U-1):

One policy professional felt the fact that ‘public good(s)’ had a defined and limited meaning in economics had made the term ‘difficult to use more broadly’. She suggested that ‘common good’, which emphasised sharing between citizens without the unhelpful juxtaposition of public and private, was more usable than ‘public good’. Others were sceptical about the unfamiliar term ‘common good’.

### Public good in higher education and knowledge

Interviewees almost unanimously saw the benefits of higher education as both private and public, and both individual and collective, though it must be said there were no current UK Treasury officers among them. Just one, a university economist, adopted the Treasury view that education provided solely private goods while research generated public goods (U-4). Others expanded on contributions like shared literacy, inclusive relations, communications, knowledge, policy advice for government, educational opportunity and social mobility. They conceived the higher education sector much as the Dearing (1997a) report had done.

There was shared recognition across the interview group, including the current regulators, that policy attention had tipped too far to the private side. However, many interviewees struggled for precision when discussing the public good or goods generated in the sector.

One economist noted that the private returns associated with degrees are easy to compute ‘but if you focus the debate on things that you can put a pecuniary number on’, the ‘social returns’, the large public good aspect, is missed (P-11). Some referred to government-designed performance indicators like research impact in the REF and the KEF (U-7), though as discussed below there was also dissatisfaction with the official metrics. One national higher education organisation had attempted to devise outcomes measures:

Unfortunately, there isn’t a simple metric or even set of metrics. A year ago we ... looked at where we could put metrics against non-economic factors. You can track things like the health of an individual or a cohort, you can track demographic participation, you can track how many are going into professions seen as vital to the public good. Some of those are measurable through metrics. An awful lot of them aren’t. (P-5, senior leader, national organisation)

Interviewee P-5 suggested that often the public benefits of higher education could be discerned only through examples, case studies and tests of specific claims about the benefits of particular universities or graduates to the community, the society or the country.

**Education** When discussing the education function, several interviewees used a narrative that joined the formative effects of individual learning to the collective good, as in the

German *Bildung* tradition (Kivela, 2012), Dewey (1916) and others. Here, the individualised outcomes of higher education were seen as broader than private pecuniary benefits. Higher education could transform students

... from someone who feels like they have no agency in their life, or they have very few choices, into someone with lots of agency and lots of choices. That is very powerful.  
(P-7, senior leader, national organisation)

I'm deeply committed to, and I have a personal experience of, the transformative power of higher education, the effects that it has on the individual, but also how that creates a broader public good as well.  
(U-1, mid-level manager-leader, university 1, literature)

Higher education formed students as capable, socialised, autonomous persons and they took this into the world. The students were 'one of our public goods' (U-1). Higher education 'contributes to a society that is a thoughtful one, that is a reflective one, that values multiplicity of perspectives, that values international perspectives' (U-1, also U-6). It formed 'people who ask questions, who understand complexity and ambiguity', who 'can reach out and be empathetic to others' (U-2). However, one policy maker cautioned against claims that higher education fostered a cosmopolitan, inclusive or equitable social order. These were 'very contested territories'. It was better to frame the public good in higher education

... in terms of knowledge and understanding, and having a critical frame of mind, and the cognitive skills to thrive, to engage successfully with other people wherever they come from... and openness to ideas.  
(P-1, policy maker and regulator)

Many interviewees criticised the extent of focus on the private pecuniary benefits. There were repeated concerns that in the full-fee English market higher education was understood in instrumental and immediately vocational terms. 'We have a narrow way of talking about benefit' (U-1). 'I don't feel that we should be a complete job shop' (U-9).

We have moved too far in the direction of thinking about the economic benefit for the individual. We need to think of education as being education, not training for a job.

Q. Even in engineering?

A. Even in engineering.

(U-6, middle-level leader, university 1, computer science)

A professor of political economy at university 1 critiqued the notion of students as consumers. 'Customers want to be satisfied. I don't think that the point of doing a university education is to feel satisfied at every moment in time' (U-4).

**Knowledge and expertise** There was less discussion of the public good character of knowledge than might have been expected. (Even the question on global public good elicited only a modest list of points on science.) The policy professionals engaged less on research than did university personnel including U-6, U-9, U-12 and U-13:

All research has the endgame of improving society, whether it's quality of life in arts or culture, or length of life in medicine, or the way we live our lives in engineering.  
(U-12, senior manager-leader, university 2, medicine)

There was also some scepticism about research as a public good. A senior manager-leader at university 1 (U-2) said: ‘it depends on how you define research funding’. Is it ‘public’, or is it ‘transactional’, payment for work done? One economist at university 2 said ‘the primary purpose of university should be to improve the academic knowledge of society’, which was a public good, yet she also emphasised that there was little prospect that her department would increase its focus on ‘the more public good aspects of economics’ (U-9).

Interviewees were more emphatic in declaring the science and social science contributions to government as public good functions. Ten of the 24 mentioned this.

**Widening participation and social mobility** Widening participation to the under-represented was a public good but interviewees had varying takes on higher education’s effects in social equity and mobility. Some cited the Robbins principle, the public obligation to provide access to all who could benefit (P-1, P-11). Certain university-based interviewees claimed their institution’s widening participation programme contributed to social mobility (e.g. U-3, U-5, U-10). But P-1 and a senior manager-leader at university 2 (U-12) emphasised that improving student development at earlier stages was essential to changing university access, and five interviewees questioned whether higher education made a difference at all. ‘There’s very little evidence that universities actually contribute to social mobility’ (U-4). ‘Most people who go to university ... start middleclass and end middleclass’ (P-4).

The policy professionals were the more sceptical. ‘You could make a pretty plausible argument that universities have actually led to exclusivity rather than inclusivity’ (P-1).

We can celebrate positive social mobility impacts of higher education on an individual level, while also acknowledging that on a collective level it is creating social division in a way that is quite problematic.

(P7, senior leader, national organisation)

### **Roles of government and institutions**

The policy makers defined the government remit in crisp and spare terms, noting the framing of norms and policy expectations, regulation as a proxy on behalf of taxpayers and students (P-1), and selected funding. Government was no longer involved in planning (P-2):

Government is a major funder of research, and it funds teaching, particularly in so far as student loans cannot be repaid, and through the Office for Students it has a regulatory function as well.

(P-3, previous policy maker)

Institutions could not be trusted and government surveillance was essential. Institutions ‘focus substantially on their own interests ahead of delivering public good’, being driven by market competition. They must consider their ‘league table standing’, intertwined with ‘research standing’ and international student recruitment. ‘I guess I would do the same in their situation’ (P-1). From a national organisation, P-7 made a similar point.

Interviewees from the national organisations and universities had a wider and less bordered vision of the role of government, including the pursuit of public good. The state should provide funding and an enabling public discourse, and guarantee social access. ‘Government should provide an environment in which universities can thrive’ (P-5). Institutions, not the state, were responsible for the contents of teaching and research, student

selection, graduate attributes and resource management. ‘Government should be hands off in the details but hands on when it comes to the overarching purposes’ (P-4).

Yet some (e.g. U-13) acknowledged that regulation allowed government to intervene at will, for example in graduate attributes or financial management. The ground had shifted. No one outside government liked this much. On one hand, government had retreated from its historical stewardship of the sector, associated with public funding, ‘convenorship’ and ‘co-regulation’ with institutions (P-7). Several interviewees were nostalgic about the former intermediary, the Higher Education Funding Council of England (P-5, P-7 and U-2). On the other hand government was imposing itself heavily in selected areas. ‘We are seen as something to manage rather than allowing us to manage ourselves’ (U-9). ‘There is a great deal of interference by government in the way universities are run’ (P-8).

There seems to be a withdrawal from straightforward commitment to funding universities, and simultaneously an increasingly interventionist approach to university, all these monitoring mechanisms, REF, TEF, KEF ...  
(U1, middle-level leader, university 1, literature)

Institutions had to comply with the TEF, REF and KEF. But while a few university people welcomed one or more of these instruments, others were concerned by the attention they demanded (e.g. U-7), the narrowing effects in education and research (U-1, U-4, U-5), inhibition of the risk taking (P-6) which Robbins had called the freedom to ‘experiment’ and above all by the reduction in effective institutional autonomy.

**University autonomy** All interviewees agreed that ‘the more autonomy the better ... universities in the English tradition are highly autonomous’ (former policy maker, P-3):

Our universities are not government entities, they’re not arms’ length bodies, academics are not civil servants in the way they are in very many systems. [Keeping] the relationship between the government and sector at a distance, is quite important  
(P-6, senior leader, national organisation)

But whereas the policy makers blandly and realistically described the relationship between institutions and government in terms of regulated autonomy, some university people distanced themselves from the state in passionate and absolute terms. ‘It’s really important that universities maintain the whole principle of independence and [are not ] interfered with’ (U-3). Yet all knew that independence was constantly suborned in practice. So they could not see where to draw a viable defensive line between government and institution. Boundary problems are endemic to liberal regimes and the higher education boundary is fuzzy. ‘There’s a kind of balance between regulation and freedom. But by and large I don’t want governments interfering’ (U-13).

**Public and private funding** Unlike the benefits of higher education, the costs of higher education did entail a zero-sum choice. Yet the divide between public/private was also guesswork, arbitrary. What share was right and just? 70% private? 50%? 30%? Once the relation between public and private outputs was positive-sum, there was no longer a basis for splitting costs. When some interviewees discussed the cost split, they floundered. Individuals did receive some benefit, and it was right they should pay part of the cost, stated one university leader. ‘But on the whole ...[higher education] isn’t a private thing’.

There's no doubt that on average that university education provides a significant private return to students, but it's hugely heterogeneous. ... higher education provides private returns but also provides huge social returns.  
(P-11, academic expert, economics and education)

Two economics professors were equally unresolved (U-4 and U-9). Yet despite the near universal rejection of a zero-sum dualism between public and private goods, interviewees often fell back on Samuelson as the default method for calculating the split of costs, triggering a convoluted reworking of the benefits. The problem was how to estimate the economic value of the public good outcomes. The subsidised student loan system added to the confusion: 'the extent to which they'll be repaid by individuals ... or written off by the state is – yeah – murky' [Laughs] (U-11). No interviewee took the way out, which was to declare financing a fiscal-political decision separate from judgments about outcomes.

Interviewees wanted Robbins outcomes but had resigned themselves to Browne financing. When costs were on the agenda, they were pulled back to the Treasury view, even though they knew that it was dangerous in a system with public as well as private benefits.

## Discussion and conclusions

Almost all interviewees saw higher education as generating a complex set of mixed individual and collective outcomes with heterogeneous benefits. This was consistent with Robbins (1963) and Dearing (1997a) but flatly contradicted Browne (2010) and Augar (2019), in which higher education's contribution consisted solely or largely of individualised economic benefits. Interviewees also largely rejected the notion that public and private benefits should be seen as zero-sum (i.e. the more an outcome is 'public' the less it is 'private', and vice versa)—except when financing was discussed. They reproduced the New Labour contradiction of the Dearing report, which combined an expansive vision of socially engaged higher education with the Treasury line on primarily private benefits so as to justify tuition fees.

### Public good emptied out

English policy on the public good outcomes of higher education has been hi-jacked and reworked by Treasury's near 30-year drive to implement a fee-based market. One sign of the national norm was the heightened awareness of graduate earnings and employment rates. It was different when it came to public good outcomes: the non-pecuniary benefits for individuals and the collective benefits for society. These competent and experienced interviewees, including half a dozen key national leaders, found it difficult to express themselves clearly and persuasively on the topic of public good. Many proffered tentative examples, or proxies like the KEF. But there were no shared concepts of public goods. The larger policy language had been emptied out in the passage from Robbins to Augar, accompanied by the matching ministerial discourse, and by regulatory instruments that had locked down education and research with financial accountability, risk assessment, product formats and competitive measures of performance in limited and stratifying domains.

Because there was no consensus about definitions and measures of public good outcomes, or their importance, or the respective roles of government and institutions in producing them, or their financing, there could be no effective challenge to the idea of private pecuniary outcomes as universal descriptors of higher education in England.

### **Public/private as a division of scale**

It is not news that neoliberal government combines selective deregulation with closer control. Each part of the antinomy is obvious in higher education in England where both marketisation and centralisation are highly developed. Yet there is more to it. The relation between government and institution is one faultline between private and public outcomes.

National government exercises tight central control over the private goods, fashioning them as economic commodities. It enforces standardised tuition, collects data on pecuniary outcomes and uses those data to calibrate the ‘value’ of courses (Augar, 2019; Belfield et al., 2018). While central government reserves the right to intervene downwards at will in monarchical fashion, it also keeps a lid on public expectations. In England, national government specifies and regulates only limited public goods, using transactional quasi-market forms: for example, the REF exchanges status and funding for the institutional performance of activities with academic and social impact. Government does not fully finance the identified public goods. For example, research is partly financed by international student fees (Foster et al., 2023) and widening participation is partly institution financed.

If there is a broader Robbins/Dearing public role as the interviewees wanted, it is sustained by the institutions and financed by their students. Institution-driven public good was explicit in the regional university. In the global university it was mostly about research.

In a centralised monarchical polity, devolved agents are weak. Single institutions can only do so much. Furthermore, the market positions institutions and students as self-interested actors. In England, sending public good downwards limits its scope, marginalises its power, fragments its universality and hedges it with private interests reluctant to pay for it.

Interviewees were deeply ambivalent about the government/institution division of scale in relation to public good. On one hand, both the market model and the claim to autonomy rendered the institutions responsible for delivering the public good, yet they lacked the necessary resources and strategic freedom. On the other hand, if government took responsibility for funding and delivering public good, as many wanted, in the present setting the provision of public good was likely to be transactional and institutional autonomy might be compromised. ‘A university’s contribution that was only public good would be in danger of being suffocated by the state’, said one academic expert (P-9).

In contrast, one policy maker saw the public good role as a source of autonomy:

It’s absolutely necessary for universities to pay more attention to the public good, just as a defence against the probably unjustified accusations that there’s too much private interest in what universities do. It’s also a natural bulwark against governments of whatever kind.

(policy maker and regulator).

An institution well-grounded in its region and locality generates a case for the modification of central control. Centralised authorities can delegate. It also depends on the larger policy context. In the high Robbins era, the 1960s, full public funding was coupled with empowered university leaders in new ‘plate glass’ universities, who experimented on a

self-determining basis with innovative governance and inter-disciplinary programmes. It is hard to envision this level of trust today. More recently, private income raising—primarily via selling places to cross-border students—has been crucial to the scope for programmatic initiative. Relations with alumni, donors, corporations, global science and international university partners, and public presence, can all have implications for institutional agency. Financing and system design are only two of the elements in play.

Interviewees moved between the realities they experienced and the ideals unfulfilled. State regulation, accountability for limited public outcomes and institutional self-interest were real and potent. Absolute institutional autonomy and broad public good were normative but symbolic. In the real world, partial corporate autonomy slugged it out with centralist top-down regulation of the neoliberal English kind. In the abstract, it was all contained within the public good as in Robbins (1963) (at least for some), but in practice what now held the higher education system together was Browne's (2010) state quasi-market.

Open-ended public good cannot come on the agenda without a system re-set. Perhaps the way forward is not the reassertion of centralised public good, but a partial deconstruction of central control and the empowerment of regions, fostering organic relations between institutions and communities (Shattock & Horvath, 2019, 2023).

## The financial nexus

Unless a stable norm is established on the private/public shares of the cost of tuition in England, its financing will remain open to political and fiscal manipulation and hence volatile. Stability could take the form of either free tertiary education, an unsubsidised market or a firmly policed 50/50 split of costs that would normalise the principle of shared funding. But the more important question is how to bring recognition of the public good outcomes, non-pecuniary individual benefits and collective relational benefits, back onto the agenda.

The claim that a private/public ratio of costs is driven by a private/public ratio of benefits is a Samuelson myth, but it has become entrenched in the policy and public spaces. The claim was always on shifting sands, because no one could define the economic value of public benefits on a basis both comprehensive and conclusive. However, the unambiguous fact of private benefit was rhetorically powerful and that alone has driven the politics of marketisation, especially as many students are socially advantaged.

The comparative examination of higher systems reveals a wide range of financial arrangements with varying balances between costs paid by governments to institutions, by governments to students, and by employers, families and students. Differently financed systems often carry out similar missions and generate similar looking social stratification and graduate employment profiles. At the same time, similar funding splits can be joined to many different system designs: compare France and Germany. In the real world, *there is no essential link* between private/public cost ratio and mission, public activities and private benefits. There is no single unitary measure of all the public benefits, economic or otherwise, and the existing measures of private goods do not capture all those benefits either. Accepting these limitations and abandoning the Samuelson myth are key to moving forward, to breaking the Gordian knot that binds public good in England.

This does not obviate the need to advance on the theorisation and measurement of public good outcomes in higher education. Though a single public good outcome is a meaningless notion, many partial outcomes can be observed. Some but not all public outcomes can

be measured while others can be addressed only with expert judgment. Certain public outcomes are economic in form but others are also important. Some measures are direct while others entail the use of proxies. For example, knowledge flows as such elude measurement. However, published science papers can be counted and research-based industry innovations can be identified. Aspects of social access are already tracked and judged. The local and regional impacts of higher education institutions are monitored, though common methodologies have yet to emerge. Progress in these areas is essential to policies that enhance public outcomes—once there is a government in England with an appetite to do so.

Policy makers can also learn from the past. Of the four reports, the most coherent was Robbins (1963). Lionel Robbins was a market-oriented economist, who appointed Hayek to the London School of Economics in 1931 and was steered in debates with Keynes and others. He nevertheless understood public goods, especially collective goods, as non-transactional, and that the public and private spheres overlap. Robbins's 90% government funding was of its time and will not return but the underlying assumptions of the report remain valid. There is no necessary relation between the private/public sharing of costs and the desired outcomes. Both are national and local policy matters. The public can pay for some private benefits of higher education, and always has, just as the private purse contributes to the public good outcomes. Within the limits of total resources, higher education is an output maximiser that nurtures any and every public and private outcome to the greatest possible extent.

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**Conflict of interest** The authors declare no competing interests.

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