

A crisis of opportunity at English universities: Rethinking higher education through the common good idea

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Abstract (250 max)

The ongoing pandemic has affected all aspects of human life globally. Universities have faced significant challenges in continuing their educational and research activities while at the same time becoming more visible due to their work on identifying treatments, developing vaccines, understanding the impact of the pandemic and exploring the ways of recovering from the crisis. English universities have been at the forefront of these global efforts and have had unique opportunities to contribute, and demonstrate their contribution, to the common good. This study is the first of its kind to offer an analysis of the new empirical material on how English universities have dealt with the pandemic from the perspective of the common good. It also offers a new, literature-based conceptualisation of the material manifestations of common good in the context of the pandemic. These key manifestations include widening participation, promoting social cohesion and democracy, promulgating a global knowledge system, promoting a sense of community embeddedness, and designing and implementing common-good oriented financial models for higher education. The study demonstrates that, despite some potentially perilous financial implications, English universities' reactions to the pandemic indicate a move closer to the common good ideal. The paper explains this crisis of opportunity to argue that the pandemic offers a potential of a shift towards the common good as a guiding principle for universities in order to support sustainable and equitable development.

Keywords: COVID-19; common good; higher education; England; university

Introduction: COVID-19 and the Common Good

The novel coronavirus (COVID-19) has disrupted almost all domains of human activity. Physical distancing, vaccine passports, and travel corridors represent the “new normal” that protect individuals but have diminished social and economic activities. Higher education is not isolated from the unprecedented upheaval of the past year. The effects of COVID-19 could be detrimental for universities and colleges, revealing and exacerbating persistent challenges that the sector has been facing over many years. However, it is sometimes supposed that we should not “let a good crisis go to waste.” This flippant remark contains a grain of truth: while crises pose new challenges, they also offer opportunities to experiment with new solutions. COVID-19 may be an example of one such crisis of opportunity. Without wishing to gloss over the suffering of past year, arguably, the pandemic provides a generational chance to rethink the goals and purposes of higher education and initiate much-needed reform.

The global society has a common challenge to overcome in the form of a deadly virus and the implications of the pandemic. The role of universities in understanding and remedying a global challenge of this scale has become much more visible throughout the last year than it has ever been before. A key publication that this study builds on – Rita Locatelli’s *Reframing Education as a Public and Common Good* – was published a year before the start of the pandemic and offers a valuable framing of (higher) education as a common good. The notion of common good goes beyond the economic classification of goods into the public and the private. When used in relation to education, this concept brings together the ideals of the “humanistic vision, participatory democracy, community engagement and integrated approach to education” (Locatelli, 2019, p. 11).

The concept of the common good is rooted in the civic republican tradition that dates back to Aristotle (Locatelli, 2019; Yang, 2020). In discussing the genealogy of the concept of the common good, Locatelli (2019, p. 119) notes that the use of ‘common’ (*res communes*) can

be traced back to Roman law, as certain commonly shared things such as air, the sea, and running water. In the *Republic*, Plato uses the term ‘common property’. According to Locatelli (2019), this line of thought later influenced the work of Latin philosophical theories, the natural law theories of Rousseau and Kant, and the Utopian socialism of the mid-nineteenth century.

The common good idea imagines a common space where individuals collectively decide on what is “good,” and work jointly towards that “good.” In Anglophone countries, a common space is informed by an emphasis on liberty, including freedom of thought and expression, and the idea of inclusive and grass-roots democracy (Marginson & Yang, 2021; Yang, 2020). Accordingly, there emerges a communitarian terrain (Locatelli, 2019; Marginson & Yang, 2021). The upholding of the communitarian terrain and inclusive democracy highlights certain shared virtues including equality and civic and moral order, in addition to liberty. See also below for the normative orientation of the common good idea. Notably, although the relevant concepts of the common good have been widely discussed and used in fields such as economics, management, political philosophy, and education (see e.g. Chan, 1995; Hardin, 1968; Murphy, 2005; Ostrom, 1990), with the aim of rethinking higher education and limited scope, this paper primarily considers the discursive discussion of the common good in the (higher) educational literature.

The common space imagined by the common good is often local, although the notion of the global common good envisions a worldwide space consisting of all humanity. As UNESCO (2015) defines it, all of humanity, consisting of multiple stakeholders throughout the world, contributes to the global common good. The (global) common good idea is also normatively oriented. It carries a humanistic vision of a global society committed to just, equitable, and sustainable development, fostering both individual and shared welfare (UNESCO, 2015). In Szadkowski (2019, p. 245) words:

[The common good] places the ontological emphasis on organic wholeness, an original relationship in which the actions regulated by normative ideas (solidarity, global cooperation, equality) are capable of stabilising the harmonious relationship between the whole and between its parts.

In addition, the common good idea highlights diversity in interpretations of “good,” thereby emphasising local embeddedness in interpreting what “good” means for a particular community (UNESCO, 2015). Importantly, the pursuit of common welfare does not intend to belittle the individual. The common good is “proper to, and attainable only by the community, yet individually shared by its members” (Dupré, 1994, p. 173).

The common good idea has attracted attention from scholars and researchers in higher education in the last decade. Many argue that it points to an alternative approach to understanding higher education that goes beyond the longstanding dilemmas caused by the public/private dualism (see e.g. Anand et al., 2007; Marginson, 2016; Szadkowski, 2019). First, the common good idea recognises democratic participation in formulating policies and governance of higher education and in financially contributing to higher education (Locatelli, 2019). Second, the humanistic vision embodied in the common good idea prompts higher education to incorporate “common understanding of its value, grounded in specific cultural and social backgrounds” (Locatelli, 2019, p. 128). Third, higher education activities can materially contribute to the common good (Yang, 2020).

This study evaluates higher education practice in the context of COVID-19 in England. It uses a perspective informed by the common good and supported by new empirical data to unpack English universities’ responses to the COVID-19. In this spirit, this paper seeks to accomplish two tasks. First, the study explains empirically how English universities have dealt with the pandemic from the perspective of the common good. Second, it offers a new, literature- and document-based conceptualisation of the material manifestations of common good in the

context of the pandemic. This paper reports the findings from the analysis of interviews and documents on the material manifestations of common good. We conducted interviews with university senior management and analysed the documentary evidence from university strategic documents as well as the documents published by key sectoral actors, such as Universities UK (UUK), the UK Council for International Student Affairs (UKCISA), and the Office for Students (OfS), in response to the pandemic.

The study demonstrates that, despite some potentially perilous financial implications, English universities' reactions to the pandemic may indicate a move closer to the common good ideal. The paper promotes a fundamental reimagining of higher education's role by revisiting the concept of the common good in the context of COVID-19. As we will argue, the pandemic provides an opportunity to rethink the recent development of higher education, guided by neoliberalism, and reveals the potential of a shift towards the common good as a guiding principle for practice. Such a re-imagination is essential for the sustainable development of higher education, and can positively affect the equitable and sustainable development of the world (Chankseliani & McCowan, 2021).

Methods

This paper draws on two primary sources of data: (1) public-facing media statements and strategic documents published by both three types of sectoral actors and three case study universities, charting their responses to the pandemic; and (2) five semi-structured interviews with executive managers from three case study universities in England. These sources were chosen to provide a broad overview of the sector's responses to COVID-19, while also offering the opportunity to contextualise these insights with in-depth reference to specific institutional environments. First, we collated a database of public facing documents from three types of sectoral actors, having identified government actors, university associations and unions as key actors to consider in the analysis. Table 1 shows the organisations identified for analysis,

chosen for their prominence and advocacy for specific groups of stakeholders affected by the pandemic, as well as the number of documents analysed from each organization and the final total.

TABLE 1 HERE.

Relevant documents were collected manually from these actors' public-facing websites. The researchers downloaded all strategic and/or policy documents, research results, press releases and media statements that had been published between January 1st and December 31st 2020. In the case of strategic and/or policy documents, those that had been published prior to 2020 but were remained "current" were also included in the analysis. All documents were collated and cleaned in Zotero, before being placed into an *NVivo* database for analysis. Documents were then analysed in light of the five material manifestations of the common good idea derived from the literature, discussed more fully below. A deductive analytical approach was employed which used, wherein five top-level nodes reflected the five material manifestations of the common good. All documents were coded according to this framework resulting in an exhaustive dataset of examples of each material manifestation of the common good in the documents. This dataset was then condensed by the research team through an iterative process that sought to identify clear examples (both positive and negative) of material manifestations of the common good in strategic and institutional responses to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Having completed the documentary analysis, three universities were selected purposively for the case study phase of the study. The case study universities were chosen to capture the variation evident in the universities system in England. Institutional location, mission, and size were the key dimensions of variation that influenced this decision. The chosen institutions were

the University of Oxford, University College London, and Staffordshire University. The University of Oxford is an elite comprehensive research university located in a small city, with a relatively small undergraduate body but relatively large postgraduate body. University College London is a comprehensive research university of unrivalled scale in the UK, located in the global metropolis of London. Staffordshire University is a smaller, teaching-focused institution with pockets of research excellence, primarily located in the post-industrial city of Stoke-on-Trent, but with a series of smaller campuses across the county and a branch campus in London.

Following case selection, public-facing strategic documents, press releases and media statements were then collected from these universities' websites and added to the database, using the same methodology. These were analysed following the same deductive approach described above to provide a record of these universities' stated and specific responses to the coronavirus pandemic, and inform discussion in the interview portion of the research. The target population for interviewees was executive managers from each institution with responsibility for institutional strategy. Participants were approached directly at their public-facing email addresses, and those that agreed to be interviewed spoke with the authors in March and April 2021. Interviews were conducted via *Zoom*, audio recorded and professionally transcribed. The interviews were semi-structured, based around a pre-prepared protocol that included institution-specific questions regarding institutional missions and responses to COVID-19, generic questions derived from the discussion of material manifestations of the common good discussed below, and broad discussion about the common good in relation to higher education. In presenting interview findings below, we refer to the participants using the initials of the name of their institutions (O for Oxford, S for Staffordshire and U for UCL) plus a specific number. For example, two participants from Oxford are referred to as O1 and O2. Participants were, therefore, individually anonymised but consented to the names of their

institutions being shared in the publications emerging from the research. Prior to the conduct of the research these research methods were appraised by the relevant Departmental Research Ethics Committee at the University of Oxford, and approved under clearance number ED-CIA-21-103.

Material Manifestations of the Common Good Idea

What might a university sector that actively promotes the common good look like? To begin to answer this question, here we offer a brief exploration of possible material manifestations of the common good within higher education, with reference to key theoretical texts and practical examples drawn from the context of the English higher education sector. As will be shown below, there are at least five material manifestations, including widening participation, promoting social cohesion and democracy, promulgating a global knowledge system, promoting a sense of embeddedness in a (global) community, and designing and implementing common-good oriented financial models for higher education.

It can be argued that a number of practical measures can be taken by universities to promote responsible citizenship, by emphasising the “organic wholeness” of society through the promotion of “solidarity, global cooperation and equality” (Szadkowski, 2019, p. 245). The prerequisite of such measures is a communitarian reflection on the relationship between the campus and the wider community. Criticisms of universities being “out of touch” with the needs and priorities of the general public are nothing new, but they are seemingly enjoying a renaissance in the recent wave of populism that appears to cross political boundaries (Hudson et al., 2020; Stecula & Pickup, 2021). These criticisms may provoke a defensive response within the sector, but there is value in considering questions such as: Where should universities sit within their communities? How can universities better cooperate with and benefit their communities? To what extent and to what effect do communities influence the work of

universities? Answering such questions in dialogue with local communities in which universities are embedded is imperative in identifying and producing common goods that are jointly valued (Dupré, 1994).

Certain practical measures can make a big difference in addressing the gulf between the campus and community. Firstly, and fundamentally, efforts to widen participation are imperative. Perhaps the starkest divide between the campus and community is that between those who are able to pursue higher education and those who are not: the haves and have-nots, so to speak. Widening participation (WP) to a broader swathe of society, including adequate support those who may otherwise be excluded, stands to make a measurable difference in reducing the gulf between campus and community, and lay the foundation for the broader development of socially responsible citizenship community-wide. Incremental progress is evident, though much remains to be done in ensuring WP students are adequately supported (Vignoles & Murray, 2016). It is also important to create more online content and engagement activities, taking advantage of advances in technology to engage with the wider public and make higher education content accessible to a wider audience.

In this vein, the National Union of Students (NUS) has recently campaigned extensively for an expansion to adult education opportunities, calling specifically for the creation of “a lifelong, funded, accessible and democratic education system, including... greater investment into adult education” (NUS, 2020). The Universities and Colleges Union (UCU) also promotes the “expansion of lifelong learning opportunities” as one of their 7 key action points for the sector (UCU, 2020). Recent research suggests that 82% of adult learners in vulnerable occupations would be interested in taking additional higher education courses (UUK, 2020).

It is not enough to simply widen access to higher education to previously excluded groups. Universities must ensure that all students who have access to higher education are adequately supported throughout their studies and provided with equal opportunities to persist until

graduation. In the UK, university drop-out rates have increased in recent years (UUP Foundation, 2020), with vulnerable students—particularly care leavers, the estranged, and those with disabilities—being less likely to complete their studies (OfS, 2020a). These issues have only become more extreme during the pandemic, with some losing access to housing or having additional needs due to the move to remote learning. To address this, the Office for Students has urged providers to both ringfence financial commitments to supporting vulnerable students, and shift commitments from other activities that have been curtailed by the pandemic and provide it instead to further bolstering support for the most vulnerable (Barber & OfS, 2020).

Universities' contributions to the common good are not adequately captured if the local community (geographically speaking) is seen as the limit of its influence. Higher education institutions are fundamentally enveloped in, and contribute to, a global community of knowledge. As Marginson (2020) argues, the knowledge production efforts of universities are both produced by and subsequently sustain a series of "collective global goods." A combination of international publication efforts and cross-border exchanges of people have become shorthand for universities' contribution on the world stage, due in part to the availability of data on these factors, and their usage in global ranking efforts. However, these are only a part of the picture of the ways in which universities' global connections contribute to the common good. Practical measures taken to ensure the global portability of knowledge are critical, including the creation of international or global systems of collaboration, knowledge sharing, publication, and data transfer are integral to the maintenance and further promulgation of a global knowledge system. This is one reason why the UK's recent withdrawal from the European Union and associated higher education collaborative schemes is such a concern for the sector. Throughout the Brexit negotiation process, the Russell Group campaigned for collaborative relations such as Horizon Europe to be protected (Russell Group, 2020b). It is

also important that the needs of the international community guide research investment, ensuring that researchers are working on the most pressing problems faced by humanity. The climate emergency is often posed as an example of one such common global issue that is served by international collaboration, and COVID-19 has recently provided another example. Certain universities have been investing in such common global issues for a number of years, University College London's "Grand Challenges" initiative being one such example, but the British government has recognised this as a blanket priority for the higher education sector. In the UK Government's *Research and Development Roadmap* (2020, p. 39), for instance, it is argued that:

The COVID-19 pandemic has thrown a spotlight on international research and innovation co-operation, demonstrating its importance in tackling global challenges and underscoring that high-quality, impactful research and innovation is increasingly a global endeavour.

Beyond their research efforts, universities also contribute to the global common good in the promotion of a sense of embeddedness in a global community. This has often been called "global citizenship," a way of being that: (1) recognises the interdependence of the world and its cultural diversity, (2) recognises that our moral responsibilities transcend national boundaries, and (3) includes a social-political commitment to change global power relations "in the direction of more equality and in the appreciation of cultural diversity" (Veugelers, 2011, p. 476). Importantly, true global citizenship goes beyond a vague sense of cosmopolitanism—with its connotations of elitism—and requires a more tangible sense of social and ethical responsibility framed in global terms, and the empowerment of students across the world with the competencies to contribute to a more just society (Jooste & Heleta, 2017).

Finally, designing and implementing common good-oriented financial models for higher education is critical if we are to understand and promote universities' contributions to the common good. As discussed above, higher education's mixture of public and private funding sources complicate discussions of the production of public goods. However, the common good idea offers an opportunity to navigate this impasse by shedding light on the need for common participation in the funding of universities and knowledge production. As Marginson (2020) explains, the common good implies common participation, including that of the private sector, and it is likely that cooperation between the public and private sectors in the funding of higher education is a possible route to developing a sustainable financial model that also promotes the common good. Care is needed here, of course, to ensure an appropriate balance of private participation without allowing the privatisation of research outputs at the expense of the common good (Locatelli, 2019). In the UK case, issues inherent to the financial model of British universities (with a heavy reliance on tuition fees, especially from international students (Tannock, 2018) have been brought into sharp relief by COVID-19. The Russell Group called it universities' "greatest financial challenge of modern times" (Russell Group, 2020a) but, as the OfS (2020b, p. 9) remarked, "issues relating to the financial viability and sustainability of higher education providers are not, however, limited to the pandemic." Short-term investments from the government have shored up providers, mitigating the immediate risk of market exit, but this does not remove the need for serious reflection on long-term financial sustainability based on common participation in funding the university sector.

The five manifestations further provide insights for governments and university managements into ways of organising higher education in service of the common good. Notably, the above five manifestations are not independent nor exclusive from each other. Instead, they are entangled with one another and there exist overlaps between them. For example, designing and implementing common good-oriented financial models for higher

education is a fundamental prerequisite to higher education's commitment to the other four aspects, and widening participation can be a useful means to promote social cohesion and democracy.

A Case Study: How English Universities Have Dealt with the Pandemic from the Perspective of the Common Good

The interviews and documentary analysis show that English universities saw “living up to” the challenge of COVID as an opportunity for reform (U1). Here we report the three universities' responses to the pandemic with a focus on their relevance to the common good.

Containing and Researching the Spread of Coronavirus On- and Off-Campus

All three case-study universities explicitly stated that the priority of the university has been maintaining “the health, safety and wellbeing of our staff, students and wider community” (University of Oxford, 2020). In part, the universities saw it as essential to have “a COVID-secure campus” in order to “inspire confidence within students [and] important staff” (S2). Some developed dedicated testing systems to contain transmission on campus. For example, Oxford set up the Early Alert Service, an in-house COVID-19 test, trace and isolate system. Similarly, Staffordshire University worked with the local council to host the local COVID-19 test site, also available to students.

Despite the public's concerns about universities spreading COVID-19, all of the participants believed that their universities had moved quickly, arguing there was no evidence of widespread transmission of the coronavirus on campus. S1 said, “I don't think we've got one case where it's been transmitted on campus at all,” while O2 also remarked that “universities are noted for thinking about things slowly and responding slowly. I think the thing

that's really surprised me and many people about university response to the pandemic is how quick we've been".

In addition, Oxford and UCL, in particular, demonstrated their capacity in contributing to dealing with the pandemic through research and innovation. A distinctive example is the development of the Oxford-AstraZeneca COVID-19 vaccine. O1 saw this achievement as "a fantastic contribution to the common good." Another example is a Continuous Positive Airway Pressure (CPAP) device that provides breathing aid for COVID-19 patients with lung infections. This new device was developed by engineers at UCL in cooperation with Mercedes-AMG HPP, and has been made freely available globally. U1 said that such device "was developed... as a non-profit activity with free licenses, and it is now been licensed to 1,500 manufacturers and is being used in 120 countries around the world".

Outreach, Engagement, and Community

All participants saw the outreach and engagement with various communities a critical aspect of their universities' responses to the pandemic. Within the local community, participants from Oxford and UCL were primarily concerned with working together to contain local transmission of COVID-19. During the pandemic, the universities' engagement with local communities were less centralised, relying on individual students' personal agency. O2 reflected that "contrary to stereotypes, our students have behaved really responsibly, and sensibly, and been a positive contributor to the city... charity work, volunteering, hospital work and so on." Participants from the two universities also admitted that the pandemic has made previous connections and engagements looser, as they were less able to welcome the local community to campus:

Obviously, in terms of the local community within Oxford, the downside has been that schools haven't visited the museums, the Pitt Rivers, the Ashmolean, the Museum of the History of Science, Natural History of all Clothes. We've struggled on that front. (O1)

On the other hand, Staffordshire employed a more extensive and structured strategy to engage with local communities, stating that “now, [our priority is], let's feed out into the community for mutual benefit” (S1). Through constant dialogue with local residents, industry and the City Council, Staffordshire University attempted to establish reciprocal and rather comprehensive connections with the region. For example, S2 reflected on a newly established centre for Business, Innovation and Enterprise at the University, whose purposes are “to leverage the benefits within the business school, ..., dovetail that into our apprenticeships team and employer partnerships more broadly to be able to meet the skills needs of the city and region, [focus] on sustainability, [look] at where the emerging sectors are, [and] work very closely with the city council.”

While Staffordshire saw international engagement as a lower priority, participants from Oxford and UCL expressed concern, as limitations on mobility made it challenging to establish new international partnerships. Nevertheless, the sector's growing familiarity with online communication had a positive effect on maintaining existing connections with myriad international networks. For example, O1 revealed “an absolutely monumental increase in participation rates. Our alumni events have seen, ... a 700% increase in participation and a greater spread of the demographic of people joining.”

In addition, participants revealed an evolving relationship with media. O1 saw a significant increase of the coverage of the university in press and said that “the vast majority of the coverage was positive.” Some participants regarded media as an effective way to mediate the public's perception of universities. For example, O1 said that increased exposure in media

during the pandemic had contributed to closing “the gap between experts being seen as remote” and producing “a bit of a halo effect not only for Oxford, but for universities more generally.” U1 was more cautious about the connection between universities and media. They argued that “I think the media frenzies are fickle and unpredictable. It’s not who’s going to do better out of COVID, UCL or Imperial, or Oxford? ... In many respects, not being at the centre of the media’s attention is not a bad thing.”

Maintaining the Financial Sustainability of the University

All participants from the three case-study universities reflected on financial concerns when the pandemic firstly emerged. For example, U1 said that “we were very concerned... a year ago we were thinking... we could be running a deficit of £140 million.” For Oxford and UCL, one of the biggest concerns was an anticipated significant decrease in fees income from international students. U1 commented that “there were points in the pandemic where people thought, international students aren’t going to come anymore, and without their fee income, the whole financial model falls apart.” This possible decrease of international students fees was also exacerbated by “the double whammy of Brexit... that’s going to have a massive effect on our finances and that, coupled with COVID” (O1).

However, at least within the case study institutions, the anticipated financial crisis did not materialise. Though sustainability remained a concern, participants expressed no immediate financial worries. S1 claimed that “we are financially secure at Staffs. We do not have an issue,” citing pre-pandemic financial prudence. At Oxford and UCL, to address the anticipated decrease in international students, both universities made more offers than usual as they expected lower uptake from both local and international students. Contrary to expectations, “everyone we’ve made an offer to, came” despite the travel barriers (O2). Similarly, U1 admitted “what do we know about student demand?... We expect we’ll make a £50 million

surplus because the student demand was extraordinary.” Simultaneously, O1 highlighted an increase in donations received in 2020 largely thanks to Oxford’s progress in the Oxford-AstraZeneca COVID-19 vaccination:

[We] thought donations income might go down quite a lot, ... Actually, we saw we had an incredible year last year, and I think it was our third best year on record. ... I would say, of course, we are benefiting from the halo effect of the vaccine.

In contrast, Staffordshire did not have significant extra income during the pandemic, except the small increase in hardship funds provided by the Office for Students. It maintained its financial stability because, as S1 revealed, “there’s been some very good financial management going on over the last few years that has really taken an organization that was probably on the brink, to one that is now firmly, very liquid.” However, the participant also acknowledged that this was only possible because Staffordshire did not have massive staffing nor significant research costs.

Nevertheless, while expressing financial security at the time of interview, all participants were concerned about the long-term financial stability of the sector. O1 emphasised that “the big question is, can we continue [fundraising] in future with moving to a less physical set of meetings?” Participants also expressed concerns about student fees for international students, particularly in the case of online delivery which has made it harder to justify differential fees. More fundamentally, all participants highlighted the financial model of higher education in England. For example, O2 said that “The undergraduate fee system and loan system with income-contingent repayments... is not a system I liked when it was introduced, but it’s quite hard to get out of now.”

Student Recruitment and Widening Participation

Indeed, all three case-study universities were concerned that COVID-19 would have a drastic effect on both absolute enrolments, and therefore fundraising, but also ongoing efforts in widening participation. As U1 explained, “we thought no students would want to come, we were projecting a 50% fall in international students, *et cetera*,” but these fears were quickly allayed. All participant universities put in place additional recruitment efforts and made extra offers to both home and international students, in an effort to mitigate a predicted drop in enrolments. In the end, both UCL and Oxford reported being “flooded with applicants,” resulting in significant over-recruitment in both undergraduate and postgraduate courses. Having said this, all participants recognised that these successes would not necessarily be evident across the sector. At UCL and Oxford, international enrolments were indeed reduced, with the shortfall being made up by expanding enrolments of home students. S1 opined that institutions with an historic reliance on international students had started “fishing in our pool:” competing for the limited population of home students that are the bread and butter of smaller, teaching-focused universities.

While student recruitment had not been drastically affected by the pandemic, at least in these case study institutions, there were persistent concerns regarding the widening participation agenda. Oxford’s slow progress in widening participation is well publicised, but increasing investments had resulted in “a real momentum of change” in the years leading up to the pandemic (O2). Participants were concerned that the pandemic discouraged WP groups from applying to university. As one participant admitted, “there have been setbacks.” But, contrary to these initial concerns, a combination of factors had unexpectedly supported the access agenda, at least in the short term. The first of these was a transition to online entrance interviews. O2 shared that “students from disadvantaged backgrounds found it far less intimidating on Zoom than coming into the professor’s study in the sandstone quad. There’s an

argument saying actually it's better [online]." In addition, recruitment at both Oxford and UCL was influenced by the A-level results debacle. O2 stated:

Normally the disadvantaged students are slightly more likely to fall up the A-level hurdle than the more advantaged ones. That differential just fell away last summer and will do again this summer, I think. That's helpful to our access agenda.

Participants at both institutions saw the 2020 intake as an opportunity to reflect on their recruitment practices, particularly the final hurdle of A-level grades that results in hundreds of disadvantaged students failing to secure admission each year. As O2 went on to explain, if the 2020 intake is successful "does it mean that we should never have that A-level hurdle in the first place? Time will tell."

Finally, participants at Staffordshire were adamant that widening participation was the university's "key mission." Staffordshire's student body has a high proportion of mature, care-leaving, and commuting students, and more than 30% of the student body comes from the lowest socioeconomic group in the country. In light of this, while recognising that recruitment efforts were crucial to this mission, interviewees also emphasised student retention, continuation, and post-study employment prospects as critical features of the institution's widening participation agenda. On the one hand, the issue of continuation had been drastically affected by the coronavirus. The university had offered additional funding and technological support since the summer of 2020 but, as concerns of dropout continued to increase, the need for more comprehensive support for students became clear.

Supporting (Vulnerable) Students

Participants were unequivocal that students had suffered throughout the pandemic and that adequate support services were more important than ever. As O1 put it: “I really, really feel for the students... The virus has shown them to be very vulnerable.” At both Oxford and UCL additional support measures were put in place, but participants remarked that “most of our students are still from pretty well-off backgrounds” and uptake remained low throughout the pandemic. In these cases, money was instead funnelled to “try to soften the blow of COVID on early career researchers and PhD students.” Having said this, both universities did isolate the challenges faced by international students who were not only subject to the same educational challenges as local students, but were either isolated from their families or studying overseas.

On the other hand, S1 remarked that “when COVID hit, it also became very apparent that a large proportion of our students were directly impacted.” When Staffordshire University saw increased food bank and crisis loan usage among its student body, it quickly rolled out additional hardship funds and crisis support funding linked only to a statement of need:

We started to read the justifications of why [the students] need it. It was just heart-breaking. We found that the majority of applications were coming from local IMD1 and 2 students¹, mature students whose partner might have lost their work or was furloughed so they had no household income coming through. They'd lost any job that they had. Other students that have come through, they had lost the job that was supporting them to keep them in

¹ The English Indices of Deprivation (IDC) are used to rank areas of England according to their relative deprivation. Factors such as average income, employment ratio, education, and health are used to calculate the IMD rating. IMD1 and 2 areas are among the most deprived in the country.

higher education. They couldn't pay the bills, they couldn't put food on the table for their kids.

At the time of the interview, participants were hopeful that none of their students had been allowed to fall during COVID-19, and noted that withdrawals had not increased dramatically. However, they also recognised that continued investments in support and hardship funds would be necessary in the coming years. Indeed, all universities agreed that managing the lasting “sociological-psychological” legacy of COVID-19 is imperative to support this generation of students in the coming years. U1 in particular was concerned about the mental health of the “early adult generation” whose development as a student had been radically disrupted by the pandemic, with unknown consequences in the medium and long term.

From On-Campus Education to Blended Teaching and Learning

Participants vividly retold the immediate concerns of the first wave. Faculty had to adapt their teaching to mediated formats, while students “were desperately worried that they were going to be disadvantaged by the change in format and having to take exams in such traumatic circumstances” (O2). This change to online learning was described as destabilising for the sector, and accompanied by concerns that disruption to the established educational model of universities would result in “more complaints from students and a bit of an uprising that why on earth am I paying 9,000 a year for tuition when I'm sat at home in my living room?” (O1).

However, participants went on to describe a relatively “nimble” response that resulted in some tentative positives for teaching and learning. When the pandemic hit, students “got sent home at very short notice... [they] were scattered all over the world” (O2). The initial transition to blended learning solutions was, therefore, an enormous but necessary “logistical challenge” that required universities as institutions to invest in new technologies, while requiring

administrative and teaching staff to adapt their teaching and support methods to these new formats. Participants from Staffordshire indicated that their prior investments in remote teaching—to serve commuting and remote learning students—helped to ease this wholesale transition to blended teaching and learning. S2 described the institution as “a bit of a pioneer” in online teaching and learning, and an example of best practice that became a model for others in the sector. Oxford and UCL, on the other hand, had further to travel in adapting to online delivery of their content. Initially, O1 described quite fundamental concerns about the ability to maintain a distinctly “Oxford” experience through mediated means: “what is an undergraduate experience at Oxford if it isn't being at the university?”

Throughout 2020, however, participants from all universities described dramatic strides forward in online teaching. O2 characterised the “pride” within the sector at their achievements in this regard:

I think we should be very proud that we have kept education going in a way that certainly in the early part of the pandemic schools didn't do. We ran a full assessment system last summer when A levels and GCSEs were completely cancelled... We haven't missed a day's teaching.

At the time of the interviews in early 2021, participants recognised that the transition to a more blended form of teaching was likely to be a lasting feature of higher education in England. S2 noted that online teaching was “starting to redefine what the campus experience is about,” and participants from all three universities remarked that students’ feedback was rather measured. While some feedback stated that students “massively missed in-person teaching” and were “desperate to get back face to face,” at the same time students had reported that they “love having recorded lectures... love having that online content... that has gone away from being the traditional in-person 50 minute or an hour lecture” (O2).

Discussion and Conclusion

These findings indicate that that COVID-19 has both posed new difficulties and exaggerated certain existing challenges for universities in contributing to the common good. However, the first year of the pandemic has also presented the opportunity for universities both to contribute to the common good, and to demonstrate these contributions in new ways. These contributions exist in at least three domains that are shared by the participating universities, though, notably, they have different strategic priorities. Oxford and UCL emphasised using their research capacity and scale to tackle the pandemic, while Staffordshire became ever more engaged with its locality.

First, the pandemic has provided further evidence of the essential role that universities play in tackling global common challenges, adding to the existing literature in this regard (see Chankseliani & McCowan, 2021; Chankseliani et al., 2021; Oketch et al., 2014; Unterhalter & Howell, 2021). As the findings show, universities have collaborated with governments, industry and the wider public to aid in containing and combating COVID-19. Universities' research progress in, for example, COVID-19 vaccination and CPAP not only saves people's lives, but has provided a source of hope about the end of the pandemic. The participating universities' decision to share research results openly and non-profitably offers a powerful demonstration of their service to the common good. These findings provide support for the argument made in the UK Government's Research and Development Roadmap (2020) on the importance of international research collaborations for addressing global challenges.

Second, universities have demonstrated their commitment to connecting with the wider community during the pandemic. According to Dupré (1994) and Szadkowski (2019), the reciprocal relationship between universities and the public is an essential prerequisite of universities' contributions to the common good. Interviews reveal that the pandemic has

provided an opportunity for universities to change people's views by engaging with, and showing their relevance to, the wider community. According to the interviews, universities have shown the public that they are no longer an "ivory tower" in various aspects. This further responds to the criticism of universities being out of touch with the general public's needs and priorities (Cote & Allahar, 2007). A powerful example here is research universities' role in COVID-19 vaccine development. However, universities also demonstrate their value by being responsible actors in local communities, mitigating the spread of the coronavirus and working actively with local governments and industry in supporting the community and economy. Importantly, universities have become more "headline-ready" and are at the forefront of discussion in broad media. This media exposure enables universities to reach a new audience and close the gap between the public and experts. However, universities still constantly struggle with the tensions between maintaining education and staying open and containing the virus. The media also plays a role in provoking these tensions. In this regard, on the one hand, it is fair to argue that universities are engaging with, and are important actors in, the communitarian terrain imagined by the common good idea (Locatelli, 2019; Marginson & Yang, 2021). On the other hand, the struggle implies that universities still need to work further on their engagement with the communitarian terrain in contributing to the common good.

Third, it is extensively documented that universities contribute to various manifestations of the common good through education. For example, higher education is a channel for upward social mobility (Cantwell et al., 2018); higher education improves the skills and knowledge base, through teaching and research, and this leads to economic development (Bloom et al., 2014; Oketch et al., 2014; Teixeira & Queirós, 2016); higher education can support democratic socialisation and the development of political culture (Atkinson, 2010; Chankseliani, 2018; Puryear, 1994; Spilimbergo, 2009). On the one hand, the pandemic disrupted these activities. As the interviews show, there are considerable concerns about students' experience with higher

education. Furthermore, while universities adapted rather quickly to a new model of blended teaching and learning, it remains unclear whether the outcomes of this new model will be positive in the medium to long-term. In addition, the interviews revealed that university education is not only about classroom learning, echoing Marginson (2018). The long-term effects of a mediated university experience remain to be explored. In addition, there is already evidence showing that the pandemic's effects are disproportionately felt by students, leading to larger inequalities (Dorn et al., 2020).

It is still early days in evaluating the results of the pandemic, but it seems there have been both encouraging and potentially perilous outcomes in relation to higher education. The findings of this study reveal that moving university admission interviews online has benefited students from low socio-economic backgrounds. Universities' online activities now bring in people from all across the world, making knowledge more open and accessible. The pressure to move teaching and learning online swiftly has led to significant progress in blended teaching and learning, with potentially seismic consequences for higher education access. However, the pandemic has revealed and exacerbated certain pressing problems for higher education as a sector. One distinctive example is the ongoing inequalities among higher education institutions (Cantwell & Marginson, 2018). The findings show that some universities are better prepared and resourced to adapt to changing conditions. This is especially the case in England considering the vertical hierarchy within the higher education system (Croxford & Raffe, 2015). Although the case-study universities have been financially secure to date, participants were concerned with the long-term financial stability of both their institutions and the English higher education system as a whole, echoing findings of Russell Group (2020a) and OfS (2020b). This is associated with a longstanding criticism of the financial model of English higher education, and particularly its reliance on international fees (Tannock, 2018).

Thus, we argue that the pandemic has mixed effects on universities from the perspective of the common good. On the one hand, considering universities' research and outreach activities, it seems fair to claim that universities have moved closer to the idea of the common good during the pandemic. On the other hand, the possibility of persistent and growing inequalities and increased financial instabilities suggests that universities still face pressing challenges in pursuing a sector that serves the common good. To date, it remains unclear what the mid- and long-term effects of the pandemic will look like. Will the sector return back to the old steady-state of the pre-pandemic world, or are we now on an irreversible course to a new steady-state for higher education? How could we better coordinate higher education institutions to tackle inequalities in the context of the pandemic recovery? All these questions remain unanswered.

In closing, we would like to offer the provocation that as a result of the pandemic, universities may now be in a better position than ever to make the argument for the common good. While the material contributions of universities to the common good appear clearer than ever, as we have argued elsewhere (Brotherhood et al., 2020), the common good has both material and discursive elements. There is much work to be done to develop the discourse of the common good, including its humanistic orientation and moral elements, and better make the argument that universities serve society best when they are supported in service to the common good.

Declaration of interest statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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Tables

Table 1.

Sectoral Actors Included in the Analysis

| Type of Actor | Organization | Documents Analysed (n) |
|-------------------------|---|---------------------------|
| Government Actors | Department for Education (DfE) | 30 |
| | Office for Students (OfS) | 40 |
| | UK Research and Innovation (UKRI) | 63 |
| University Associations | Universities UK (UUK) | 73 |
| | GuildHE | 7 |
| | The Russell Group | 67 |
| | UK Council for International Student Affairs (UKCISA) | 22 |
| Unions | National Union of Students (NUS) | 117 |
| | Universities and Colleges Union (UCU) | 31 |
| Total | | 450 |