



Higher education and public good in England

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Abstract

In the Anglophone jurisdictions, higher education policy is over-determined by economic policy and subjected to neoliberal regulation based on quasi-market competition between corporatised institutions, regulated by performative comparisons, tuition fees, and outputs imagined as commodities. England installed marketisation in successive policy changes between the Thatcher government's introduction of commercial fees for international students in 1979 and the full-fee market for domestic students, supported by subsidised income-contingent loans, in 2012. Policy commitment to public good outcomes (the collective and non-pecuniary individual benefits of higher education) was largely emptied out, leaving only attenuated proxies such as widening participation and research impact. Responsibility for public good outcomes was transferred from government to institutions. Following a discussion of Anglophone concepts of 'public' and an overview of key policy reports from 1963–2019, the paper reports on qualitative research into approaches to higher education and public good in England. There were 24 semi-structured interviews, with middle and senior manager-leaders in two universities and policy professionals. Nearly all advocated a broad public good role, in contrast to policy in England, and provided examples of public outcomes in higher education. However, these concepts lacked clarity, while at the same time the shaping effects of the market were sharply understood.

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

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Introduction

This paper reports on a study of higher education and public good in the nation of England within the United Kingdom (UK). The research consisted of 24 semi-structured interviews in two research-intensive universities with contrasting missions (13) and with policy professionals (11): people working in government and in national organisations focused on higher education policy and academic experts on higher education in the UK. As background, the paper also tracks the evolution of official English thinking about higher education and public good in selected policy-related public documents from the period 1963–2019.

In the paper, the term ‘public good role of higher education’ refers to those activities and contributions of higher education that do not take the form of pecuniary benefits received by single individuals, such as the status and earnings associated with graduation. The public good outcomes of higher education include both non-pecuniary benefits received by individuals, such as the contributions of higher education to personal growth or formation as a citizen, and collective benefits such as the effects of higher education in fostering technological literacy, public health, local cultural activities, or peaceful and tolerant society. (In the interviews, however, individual respondents did not necessarily have these interpretations of ‘public good’ in mind. For more discussion of terms including ‘public good’ and ‘public goods’ see Brewis and Marginson; Marginson, this issue.)

Approaches to education and public good vary between the four UK nations (Callender, 2023). In Scotland, where domestic students pay no tuition fees, and in Wales, where system-wide cooperation takes priority over inter-university competition, there is stronger government commitment to the public good role of higher education than is the case in England. Nevertheless, the interviews reviewed here pertain solely to policy in England, where all but one of the interviewees worked. This is not only because England has 84.3% of the UK population. The ‘hyper-commodified’ character of its higher education system (Promenzio & Boliver, 2024) gives it special significance in relation to issues of public good. Arguably, of the world’s higher education, England’s policy most completely realises the neoliberal ideal, in which freedom is grounded in economic market exchange and education is seen in solely individualised terms, with particular consequences for the role of the state and understandings and practices of the collective social contributions of higher education.

The paper is set out as follows. It begins with a short summary of England’s political economy and higher education system. It then provides further contextual background to current approaches to public good, in two domains: Anglophone political culture and the history of higher education policy in England. First, the paper reviews the usage of ‘public’ in Anglophone political cultures. The objective is not to install Anglophone ideas as universal, but rather to provincialise those ideas, so as to better understand the approach to the public good in higher education in England. Then, it tracks the arc of public good in higher education in selected policy documents: the milestone reports by Robbins (1963), Dearing (1997), and Browne (2010) and also the Augar (2019) report which brings the account close to the time of the research. The section that follows presents insights from the 24 semi-structured interviews. Discussion and conclusions complete the paper. The supplementary material contains more information from the four policy reports and further interview data.

The paper necessarily omits much relevant detail about higher education in England, including the lesser reports which populated the public space between the milestones, the

institutional stratification and regional variations which shape patterns of social use of higher education (Boliver, 2017), the machinery of regulation, the core issues and debates which animate policy discussion, and comparison between the English system and others across the world. On the last point, there is more in Marginson and Yang (2022, 2023) and other articles in this Special Issue, which is essentially comparative.

Contribution of the study

UK and English policy on the public good role of higher education evolve within the public sphere, and since the 1963 Robbins report, there has been continuous debate and discussion. One might assume that questions about the public good role of higher education have triggered much research. However, there has been less scholarly study and analysis than policy commentary and polemic, and emphasis has fallen not on that public good role *per se* but on particular issues related to it, such as whether students should pay tuition fees, whether or not students see themselves as consumers, and university autonomy. The collective contributions of higher education have not been systematically researched.

Since the introduction of fees for domestic students in England in 1998 (see below), research and scholarship have mostly been critical of the trajectory of policy, focusing on negative effects associated with marketisation (though less critical papers include Eagle & Brennan, 2007; Woodall et al., 2012). For example, Naidoo and Jamieson (2005) explore the implications of fee charging and the consumption paradigm for teaching and learning in UK universities, Naidoo et al. (2011) consider regressive implications for the academic profession and for programmes focused on the social widening of participation, and Naidoo (2015) on ‘the competition fetish’ critiques the norms of social relations that underly neoliberal policy. Interviewing academic staff in three UK business schools, Jabbar and colleagues (2018) conclude that

Academics within our sample attribute a number of negative outcomes to the consumerisation of higher education within their institutions. These include an increase in transactional attitudes among students that are not conducive to learning, pressures to recruit a greater volume of students, increased workloads and additional stress, and concerns over the quality of provision (Jabbar et al., 2018, p. 98).

McCulloch (2009) argues that students are better modelled as ‘co-producers’ rather than consumers of their own education. The student interviews by Nixon and colleagues (2016) show how ‘market ideology in an higher education context amplifies the expression of deeper narcissistic desires and aggressive instincts that appear to underpin some of the student “satisfaction” and “dissatisfaction” so crucial to the contemporary marketised higher education institution’ (p. 927). Tomlinson (2017) uses qualitative techniques to survey student responses to the policy positioning of themselves as consumers in seven different UK higher education institutions. He notes that while there is partial evidence of growing identification with a consumer-orientated approach, ‘students still perceive higher education in ways that do not conform to the ideal student-consumer approach’ (p. 450). There are mixed and complex views. ‘Students who actively resisted the consumer ethic tended to emphasise the intrinsic value and benefits of their learning and its role in nurturing self-development.’ (p. 462). However, while these students referred to non-pecuniary individual outcomes, there was little discussion of collective public good in the study.

The historical reviews of the evolution of policy by Shattock (2012) and Scott (2021) discuss the effects of marketisation in fostering greater inequalities between universities,

the partial evacuation of government responsibility for the outcomes of higher education, and the concurrent assertion of closer government control, but do not directly address the public good role of higher education in terms of the collective goods that are produced. If marketisation is eroding the public remit of institutions, it is left unclear what comprises that public remit. In Brown (2011), a trenchant critique of the neoliberal market model, the brief references to ‘public good’ and ‘public goods’ understand those terms in the attenuated sense of Samuelson (1954) that underpins neoliberal policy economics (see below). There are broad references to collective outcomes of higher education in various UK sub-literatures such as studies of the role of research and knowledge, of social inequalities in participation in higher education, and of the contribution of universities to cities and regions (e.g. Goddard et al., 2016), but these studies do not systematically define, explore, theorise, or measure the role of higher education in producing collective public good.

To the authors’ knowledge, the present paper constitutes the first research study directly focused on attitudes to the role of higher education in England in relation to public good. The inclusion of policy professionals, including past and present policymakers/regulators, adds to its significance, as the prior studies of attitudes to marketisation and other public good–related issues have been confined to academics and students.

England and higher education

The UK is a constitutional monarchy governed by top-down sovereignty, regulated by periodic elections, that was transferred from monarch to parliament after the seventeenth-century civil war (Ascherson, 2023; Keay, 2022). This contrasts with those Western European polities which effectively combine central coordination with bottom-up decentralisation in governance, such as Germany. While in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland the devolved national administrations provide some relief from top-down UK control, in England, governance of the UK and England map onto each other and both are highly centralised in Westminster, the political head, and Whitehall, the administrative head. The Treasury, which synchronises the state with the capitalist economy, determines social as well as economic policy. The centralising English state is a limited liberal state, yet a powerful state that fosters the market separated from itself, and firmly controls the social service sectors whether through privatisation or direct rule. It fashions a singular public good from above.

Treasury presides over an economy 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 (World Bank, 2023). Of the 41 European NUTS 2 regions¹ in the UK in 2017, ten regions had per capita incomes below 80% of the EU average, while West London with 626% of the EU average was much the richest region in Europe (EU, 2023).

In higher education in 2022–2023, there were 2.937 million enrolled students in 2022–23, in 285 registered institutions (UUK, 2023), 2.423 million of them in England. Institutions in England received £44.038 billion in income (HESA, 2024). The small elite universities in the UK prior to World War II enjoyed significant autonomy, but massification and the expansion of spending on the sector after 1960 were inexorably correlated with the growth of central control. While higher education intermittently connects to

¹ NUTS refers to the French term for statistical regions used by the European Union: Nomenclature des Unites Territoriales Statistiques. NUTS 2 regions are about twice the size of English counties. In 2017, Wales consisted of two NUTS 2 regions, and there were five in London.

localities, it has been decisively shaped by central economic policy and national regulation. In *The Governance of British Higher Education*, Shattock and Horvath (2020) argue that ‘the state has become a powerful overlord of higher education’ and the main driver of change in the sector, not the institutions (p. 153). This has not necessarily been to the benefit of English higher education. Shattock and Horvath find that Westminster has faltered in its ‘duty of care’, amid a declining unit of resources and instability (p. 154). In *Universities and Regions* (2023), Shattock and Horvath call for partial decentralisation of higher education on the basis of regional cooperation with local government, industry, and further education.

Like the society, higher education is 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); Oxford and Cambridge enjoy a global status equivalent to that of leading USA’s universities such as Harvard, Stanford, MIT, and Princeton. However, the intensity of educational participation and research drops sharply in the poorer regions.

England is unusual in the extent to which policy on higher education and public good is now determined by economic ideas and models (Scott, 2021), as this paper will show. The marketised character of the system is indicated by its financing base. Domestic tuition fees, which were fixed at £9250 per student in 2017 (this was still the tuition level in mid-2024) are high in international terms (OECD, 2023) and the sole source of funding for most first-degree student places. English institutions in 2022–2023 were also highly dependent on the 23.7% of students who were non-EU students and paid fees at commercial rates. Those fees contributed 21.1% of institutional income in England in 2022–2023 (HESA, 2023), subsidising domestic teaching, infrastructure, and research.

Anglophone approaches to ‘public’

The paper now briefly outlines the prevailing Anglophone political culture, and the understanding of public good in six decades of reports on higher education policy in England.

Perhaps the key moment in the evolution of the modern Euro-American polities was the Enlightenment’s repudiation of feudal authority and the evolution of a state based on the division of powers between executive, judiciary, and democratic assembly. This evolution took differing forms from country to country. The French Revolution of 1789–1794 foregrounded the assembly of citizens and a larger public role for the republican state, as the foundation of civil order, than the role of the state as it was developing in Britain. There, Adam Smith sought to constrain the state while enlarging the space for civil association (Smith, 2002/1759) and the economic market (Smith 1937/1776), though the line between them was not always clear.

Anglophone society is divided between government-as-state with coercive powers, potent within its limits, the economic market, variable civil society, and the individual or household which has an ill-defined normative primacy. Mazzucato (2023) remarks that there is less interest in the common good, because of belief in the liberal precept ‘that individuals best determine their own good without external impositions’ (p. 3). Hence, politics turns on the antinomy between autonomy and authority, though in practice autonomy is often regulated. The boundaries between the state and other sectors are tense and contested, including the university/state boundary.

Throughout Western Europe, including England, the legal incorporation of medieval universities established for them a partially autonomous space, between church and state, enabling them to pursue universalising scholarship and, later, science. When more modern governments and societies built national and civic universities, the sector referenced the Humboldtian ideal, whereby the university served the state on the basis of freedom to teach, learn, and research. US public universities, while partly dependent on state funding and seen as servants of the economy, are also positioned as civic institutions and self-serving market actors. American institutions embrace this multiplicity of roles, expectations, and stakeholders, which seems to enhance their autonomy within it. However, in England, the polity is more centralised, and the multiplicity seems less comfortable. Are higher education institutions creatures of the state, civil society, the economy, all, or none? In particular, their autonomy vis-a-vis the state is perpetually ambiguous and problematic (Scott, 2021).

In English, the meanings of ‘public’ and the public/private distinction are plural, diverse, and confusing. Three meanings are primary: (1) ‘public’ as a shared or universal beneficence, virtue, or prospect in the social realm, as in ‘*the public good*’ (Mansbridge, 1998); (2) ‘public’ as a descriptive adjective, not excluding ‘private’, signifying open and inclusive social-communicative relations, as in ‘public opinion’ or ‘the public sphere’ (Calhoun, 1992; Fraser, 1990); 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/private dualism

The private/public dualism takes two heterogeneous forms (Marginson, 2018). First, the political-juridical ‘public’ means state or government, as in the ‘public sector’ distinct from the ‘private’ self, home, family, market, or corporation—for example, national, state, or public universities are distinguished from private universities by legal ownership.

The second public/private dualism is from economics and specifically from an influential argument by Samuelson (1954). Samuelson understands all social activity as economic activity. He distinguishes between public goods and private goods. In a capitalist society, economic activity is normally realised as market transactions and private goods. However, there is a category of goods that are subject to market failure because their production cannot generate profit, either because they are non-excludable, meaning the benefits cannot be confined to single buyers (e.g. clean air regulation), and/or because they are non-rivalrous, meaning they can be consumed by any number of people without being depleted (e.g. a mathematical theorem, which sustains its value indefinitely no matter how many times it is used). Goods subject to market failure are public goods funded by the state or philanthropy. Samuelson’s normative formula maximises the scope for market production and exchange while reducing the state to a residual role. Since the 1979–1990 Thatcher government, Samuelson’s formula has underpinned successive British initiatives to privatise state-run functions such as education, transport, and utilities.

Scholars from outside economics find it preferable to conceive ‘public’ without a zero-sum public/private trade-off. For example, 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). In this vision, the public good is a collective container for incubating the private good. Private and public goods can be augmented together. But Anglophone economic policy is predisposed against collective ideas and practices, and

historically, universal forms of public provision have been achieved only through strenuous political effort. The UK's post-World War II welfare state was an accumulation of such efforts, culminating in a universal National Health Service, free at the point of delivery, which still (just) survives. However, the evolution of higher education in England has been different.

When following the Samuelson logic, education can be seen as a largely private good. In essence, because student places *can* be produced on the basis of rivalry or excludability (for example by charging prices, making high-value opportunities scarce, and/or stratifying the value of different kinds of institutions or the value of their outcomes), neoliberal economics argues that they *should* be so produced. When that becomes the policy reasoning, there is an unambiguous case for public financing based on market failure only in basic research, a clear Samuelson public good. This provides Treasury departments with a rationale for minimising both their public policy responsibilities and their spending.

Samuelson's formula has three other implications that shape policy in all Anglophone jurisdictions, notwithstanding the many differences between them. First, higher education is always transactional, financing in exchange for services, even the government funding of public outcomes. But in the case of some public outcomes, the concept of transaction is meaningless (what is the value of climate science?), so such outcomes are unrecognised in policy economics. 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, both public and private together. Third, there is a tight nexus between, on one hand, the definition of mission and activity in higher education, the 'goods' or benefits (private or public) that it is seen to produce, and, on the other hand, the funding (private or public). Higher education is publicly funded only as a minimal public good.

The default position of Anglophone neoliberal governments (Olssen & Peters, 2005) is that higher education is a quasi-market competition between institutions, regulated by price signals and/or status orders created by calibration exercises such as research assessment and university ranking. A zero-sum dualism of private and public goods is mapped onto the formula for private/public costs, or perhaps it is vice versa: Samuelson is used as a rationale for reducing spending. Hence neoliberal governments emphasise the private pecuniary benefits, including earnings and 'employability', and mostly ignore common or collective social outcomes.

No government applies Samuelson in full (Marginson, 2013). For example, all governments subsidise individual opportunity—which in a neoliberal universe is understood as the right of access to accumulation of private goods—via student grants or loans. Most governments provide some assistance to prospective students from under-represented groups. There are also policy gestures towards ill-defined social missions of universities via 'third stream', 'engagement', or 'impact' activity. But social action is seen as primarily the responsibility of institutions, not a duty of the state as part of a broad public good remit.

The abiding weakness of this policy framework is that it under-plays all contributions, effects, and values in higher education that are not defined as Samuelson private goods.

The public good in UK policy reports

Through all UK policy regimes, from the welfare state of 1945–1975 to the neoliberal high capitalism that prevailed from the 1980s onwards, the educational, social, and economic weight of higher education has grown, albeit unevenly and in fits and starts. At the same time, the shaping discourses and rationales have undergone marked changes. The full neoliberal framework was put into place from 1998–2012, after a mass higher education system was already established. Over that time, public higher education institutions moved from no tuition charges for domestic students to the highest tuition in public institutions anywhere in the world. This change can be tracked by comparing the approach to the public good in higher education in four successive policy reports in 1963, 1997, 2010, and 2019.

The approach to the public good role of higher education must be inferred. It is notable that the terms ‘public good’ and ‘public goods’ appear in none of the reports. ‘Public’ is used sparingly, mostly with reference to sources of funding, or in a communicative-inclusive sense of the word, or with reference to the state’s role as a repository of the public interest.

The Robbins report (1963)

The Robbins committee was established by the then Prime Minister Harold Macmillan. According to Scott (2021), the Robbins report ‘occupies an iconic place in the history of higher education in the UK’ (p. 40). It established the concept of a higher education system and normalised the principle that all qualified students who aspired to higher education should be able to enter. Its impact rested partly on the quality of its prose and its capacity to inspire. Beneath its largely practical discussion lay a vision of higher education without limit, like Virgil’s Rome, that far exceeded an economic rationale grounded in scarcity and productivity. Its broad claim for the role of higher education was summarised in the very final sentence: ‘it [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).

Robbins did not see the public and private outcomes of higher education as zero-sum. The report was issued at a time when higher education was 90% publicly funded. As Robbins saw it, within higher education as a public good, individuals secured both pecuniary and non-pecuniary gains, and society benefitted from both. However, as time went on and the growth rate of higher education enrolments exceeded the growth rate of GDP, the cost of expansion loomed ever larger in the mind of the Treasury (Shattock, 2012, p. 5). In 1979, the newly elected Thatcher government introduced full-cost fees for international students. This installed a commercial incentive in universities, which found they could use international students to fill gaps in public funding. ‘If there was one decision which may be said to have contributed to the marketisation of British higher education, it was this’ (Shattock, 2012, p. 160). Nevertheless, in the early years, its impact on total university finances was modest.

The Dearing report (1997)

The Dearing committee met at a time of transition amid growing advocacy of neoliberal business and market models, in UK circles and in reports of the OECD and World Bank which saw higher education and research as key components of a global knowledge

economy (Dale, 2006). Treasury's first mode of managing the cost of expansion had been to under-fund it—public funding per student declined by more than 42% between 1976–1977 and 1995–1996 (Shattock, 2012, p. 131)—and the Vice-Chancellors were campaigning for 'top-up' student fees to supplement government funding (p. 5). As had been the case with the Robbins report, a large part of the Dearing committee was from higher education itself. This was not a Treasury-dominated process: the committee saw the world in terms of a knowledge society imaginary, rather than the knowledge economy. The Dearing process had been established by a Conservative government but coincided with the election of the Blair New Labour government with a sweeping mandate. This timing meant the Dearing committee had a relatively open agenda with the freedom to move in whatever direction it chose. In the outcome, it moved in more than one direction at the same time. It positioned a neoliberal case for tuition fees within a vision that was universalist and social democratic.

The report located higher education amidst a multi-strand engagement with government, society, and economy. It saw the purposes of higher education as 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'. Higher education should 'enable society to make progress through an understanding of itself and its world' (Dearing, 1997, p. 72). These enlarging statements secured for the Dearing committee the immediate and long-term support of the higher education sector. However, the report also proposed the introduction into the English system, free of charges for domestic students, of tuition fees financed by income-contingent student loans, to be repaid from later earnings after leaving higher education. This pleased the Vice-Chancellors and Treasury but displeased many others. To justify fees, the Dearing committee framed a Treasury-style narrative that defined higher education as economic rather than social in character, contradicting other parts of the report. In this narrative, the outcomes of higher education were presented as being private and market-based. This definition was linked directly to fee charging. For the first time in England, the private benefits were correlated with private financing, as Samuelson (1954) had said.

In 1998, the recently elected Labour government introduced a £1000 fee, though without Dearing's proposed income-contingent student loan-repayment mechanism. Later, in 2005, Labour hiked the fee to £3000, and this time, it applied the income-contingent loan scheme. However, this did not settle the problem of designing a system able to finance expansion, and in 2009, Labour established a new inquiry into fees and funding. This was eventually reported after a Conservative Party-led coalition government had been elected.

The Browne report (2010)

The Browne committee proposed the largest transformation since Robbins. It modelled higher education wholly in the form of a national economic market, with full-price tuition fees supported by income-contingent loans.

Like Dearing, the Browne committee couched the role of higher education in broad social and cultural terms:

Higher education ... helps to create the knowledge, skills and values that underpin a civilised society. Higher education institutions generate and diffuse ideas, safeguard knowledge, catalyse innovation, inspire creativity, enliven culture, stimulate regional economies and strengthen civil society. They bridge the past and the future; the local and the global (Browne, 2010, p. 14).

Yet this broad role was not further defined, and the report immediately followed this passage with a discussion of the pecuniary and personal-developmental benefits for individuals (Browne, 2010, p. 14). This was joined to economic calculations of the value of those benefits (p. 15). The logic of the Browne report was that any and every broad-based outcome of higher education would have to be financed by individualised tuition payments. ‘With public resources now limited, new investment will have to come from those who directly benefit from higher education’ (p. 25). This meant that student consumers would have a vested interest in minimisation of the cost of those outcomes of higher education of no direct value to them as individuals, including basic research and other collective benefits.

A modified Browne scheme was implemented in 2012. Direct funding of most domestic student places was abolished. The government continued to partly finance participation, because it underwrote the unpaid proportion of tuition loans, initially estimated at one-third of all student debt. However, this form of subsidy operated below the public radar and did not disturb the wholly privatised form into which higher education had been recast.

In 2018, the government developed fuller market-style regulation to match the fee structure. It abolished the intermediary funding council that had sat between minister and institutions, creating a new 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). This paralleled England’s organisation of privatised power, water, and rail. Just prior to this, in 2017, the government created a Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) that calibrated individual institutional performance, using comparative graduate salaries and student satisfaction surveys. This focused attention on the private pecuniary benefits of higher education while positioning students solely as consumers. Successive ministers directly instructed the OFS. The government also required universities to pursue collective outcomes in selected areas. The Research Excellence Framework (REF) incentivised research with social ‘impact’ while functioning as a mode of accountability for research funding. The Knowledge Exchange Framework (KEF) focused institutions on the needs of social and economic partners. Under the widening participation policy, institutions were required to enhance student participation from under-enrolled social groups and regions. These were supplements to the market in private educational services, rather than signs of an alternative public good-oriented system.

The passage from Robbins and Dearing to Browne had been a shift from planning and funding to regulation and from arms-length funding to reduced public investment that was tied to more direct ministerial control. It largely emptied out official recognition of the public good role of higher education. Institutions, not government, were now held to be responsible for both the individual and the collective benefits of higher education. The government saw itself in terms of the neoliberal trope of ‘steering not rowing’. It generated data nominally intended to inform the student-as-consumer and shape provision and efficiency while normalising the neoliberal understanding of outcomes as private pecuniary goods.

The Augar report (2019)

In the 2017 election, Labour promised to abolish tuition fees and almost took power on a wave of youth support. This prompted the Conservative government to establish another review of fees and funding, not to replace the market system but to secure a politically saleable fee reduction. The Augar committee recommended a fee reduction from £9250

to £7500, which was never implemented. However, the report is more interesting for what it says about the trajectory of government thinking on public good. Like the Browne committee, the Augur committee worked within the Treasury culture. It focused on ‘enhancing value for money’ in a system that ‘incentivises choice and competition’ (p. 65). ‘Value’ was defined unequivocally in terms of individual pecuniary benefits. Non-pecuniary benefits for persons and collective benefits for society had now been wholly omitted from policy consideration. Only one separately boxed paragraph in the report 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 (Augur report 2019, p. 87).

That was as far as it went. The Augur committee knew higher education generated public good and its ‘wider value’ should be recognised but had no idea how to do it. The Augur report’s irresolution showed that mainstream English policy no longer had tools for imagining, investigating, or enhancing the public good role of higher education. Even so, despite the dominance of Treasury policy, there was still a residual expectation in the public mind that universities were more than private businesses selling a service: that they had a larger public role and hence were a matter of public interest. They ‘remained semi-detached private institutions, half-inside and half-outside the public domain’ (Scott, 2021, p. 11).

Interviews in institutions and with policy professionals

The paper now passes to the empirical research on the public good role of higher education. The study in England was one of ten country studies, using a common framework. The research design, including the rationale for the selection of two contrasting universities and the approach to data analysis, is explained in Brewis and Marginson, this Issue.

In 2017, semi-structured interviews were conducted in university 1, a London-based global research institution (6), and university 2, a provincial research university (7) with university leaders, middle manager-leaders, and professors. In 2021, there were 11 interviews with a group of people we designate as ‘higher education policy professionals’: people currently working as government regulators (2); people leading national organisations focused on higher education policy (5), two of whom previously worked as policymakers; and academic experts on higher education in the UK (4). Table 1 is an anonymised list.

The four-year time gap between the two groups of interviews was less consequential than might be expected. Issues related to the public good role of higher education are enduring, and the policy framework in 2021 was largely similar to 2017. The same political party was in government with the same marketised higher education system. The main difference was that when the interviews were conducted in 2017, the Office for Students structure had been announced, but the OFS did not start work until 1 January 2018.

All interviews were audio recorded and professionally transcribed. The proposed research was assessed by the Research Ethics Committee of the Department of Education

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	Senior-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	Policymaker and regulator	Male	
P-2	Government agency	Policymaker and regulator	Male	
P-3	National organisation	Previous policymaker and current leader of organisation	Male	
P-4	National organisation	Previous policymaker 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 (2017), Simon Marginson (2017, 2021) and Lili Yang (2021). U-1 to U-13 interviewed face to face in 2017; P-1 to P-11 online in 2021

at the University of Oxford (clearance CIA-21-270). Interview data were coded and analysed on an inductive basis, within four broad deductive categories based on the research questions:

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

There were interesting variations in the responses. Regional university 2 focused more than did the more global university 1 on local outreach and regional mission. Though two economically trained interviewees from the universities expressed policy views close to those of the Treasury, the other economically trained interviewees had views similar to the non-economically trained interviewees. The policymakers/regulators, none of whom were economists, differentiated from other interviewees in relation to the role of government (three of them endorsed the ‘steering not rowing’ principle), but not on other issues.

A larger and more diverse set of universities (i.e. beyond the scale of the common template used in the ten country studies) and a larger group of English policy professionals, including officials from the Treasury and the Cabinet Office, leaders of UK research agencies, and additional academic experts, would have strengthened the study. Considerations of anonymity have limited the extent to which responses from different groups are compared.

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 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). Over half the interviewees, including most of the policy professionals, developed an expansive, ill-defined domain of public action or relations (U-2, P-1, P-7, P-8, and P-9 were especially forthcoming).

Public good equates to something like the wider needs of society.

(P-4, previous policy maker and current leader of national organisation)

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 (P-1) to explain the state’s role in the public good, but 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):

Roles of government and institutions

The four policymakers defined the government's public remit in crisp and spare terms. They saw it as including the framing of norms and policy expectations, regulation as a proxy on behalf of taxpayers and students (P-1), research, and the subsidisation of unpaid student debt. The government was no longer a planner (P-2). However, because institutions were driven by market competition and pursued their own interests such as their league table position, they could not be trusted, and government surveillance was essential (regulator P-1; national organisation leader P-7 also stated this position).

For the most part, interviewees from the national organisations and universities had a wider and less bordered vision of the role of government, including its contribution to the public good in higher education. Most interviewees explicitly stated that it should provide funding and social access. P-5 argued that it should shape an enabling public discourse: 'Government should provide an environment in which universities can thrive'. 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 in the universities (e.g. U-13) acknowledged that regulation allowed the government to intervene as it saw fit, for example, in graduate attributes or financial management. The ground had shifted, and the old norms of state responsibility combined with institutional autonomy had broken down at both ends. Responsibility, including funding, had passed downwards, while the central government extended regulation as it wished (U-1, U-9, P-8). Several interviewees were nostalgic about the old intermediary body, the Higher Education Funding Council of England (P-5, P-7, and U-2). There was concern about the narrowing effects of instruments like the TEF, REF, and KEF (U-1, U-4, U-5, U-7), though some interviewees saw one or more of these as valid proxies for public good outcomes.

Institutional autonomy

All interviewees, including the policymakers/regulators, 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)

However, it was unclear whether the public good lay in independence from the government or greater accountability. Whereas the policymakers blandly and realistically described relations with institutions as 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 they knew this independence was suborned in practice and could not see where to draw a viable defensive line. Boundary fuzziness is endemic to liberal regimes. '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 financing divide between public/private was arbitrary. What share was right and just? 70% private? 50%? 30%? Once the relation between public and private outputs was seen as positive-sum, there was no longer a basis for splitting costs. When some interviewees discussed the cost split, they floundered.

Look at someone who does a medical degree. You will financially benefit from doing a medical degree and you'll be in a well-paid, secure job, and you'll also be delivering lots of public good.

(P-5, senior leader, national organisation)

Despite the near-universal rejection of a zero-sum dualism between public and private goods, interviewees often fell back on Samuelson's formula as the default for calculating the public/private split of costs. This sometimes triggered a convoluted reconsideration of the public/private 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 of the problem: to declare financing to be a fiscal-political decision separable from the nature and outcomes of higher education.

Public good in higher education and knowledge

Interviewees from all sectors almost unanimously saw the benefits of higher education as both private and public and both individual and collective. 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 collective contributions such as shared literacy, inclusive relations, communications, knowledge, policy advice for government, educational opportunity, and social mobility. Several interviewees from the universities conceived higher education as multiple outcomes in much the same way as Dearing (1997).

There was shared recognition across the interview group, including most policymakers, that policy attention had tipped too far to the private side. However, many struggled for precision when discussing the public good role of the sector.

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)

Education

When discussing the education function, several interviewees in the universities used a narrative that joined the formative effects of individual learning to social formation and 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.

I'm deeply committed to, and I have a personal experience of what I think as the transformative power of higher education, the effects that that has on the individual, but also then how that then creates a broader public good as well.

(U-1, middle 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-2, U-6, P-1).

Almost half of the interviewees criticised the extent of focus on the private pecuniary benefits in the full-fee English system. Several argued in detail that higher education was too much understood in instrumental and immediately vocational terms (U-1, U-6, U-9).

Knowledge and expertise

There was less discussion of the public good character of knowledge than expected, with most of it coming from the universities (U-6, U-9, U-12, and U-13). There was some scepticism about research as a public good. One senior university manager-leader said, 'it depends on how you define research funding'. Is it 'public', or is it 'transactional, payment for work done?' (U-2). Interviewees were more emphatic in declaring the contributions of science and social science to government as a public good. Ten of the 24 interviewees mentioned this, including two of the four policymakers/regulators.

Widening participation and social mobility

Most interviewees advocated, as a public good, widening participation to people from social groups under-represented in higher education. However, they had varying takes on higher education's effects on 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, without qualification, that 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 more socially equitable university access, and five interviewees questioned whether higher education made a difference at all (especially U-4, P-1, P-4, P-7). The policy professionals were the more sceptical, with three advancing the argument that by socially stratifying the population between those with degrees and those without, higher education generated what are in effect public bads:

You could make a pretty plausible argument that universities, given the character of our missions and the influence of social background on missions, actually have led to exclusivity rather than inclusivity

(P-1, regulator and policy maker)

Global public good

When asked to define global public good, some interviewees simply referred to making the world a better place (U-13). Universities were international, and this was a fine thing (U-3). Their educational activities and their research fostered empathy and naturally enhanced the global public good (U-14). Others pushed back against these easy assumptions and against notions of a single global public good—‘It is so high level as to be almost meaningless’ (P-7)—which tended to embody strong country agendas:

I’ve seen far too many historical examples of someone sitting in London, or New York, or Beijing, deciding what the global public good is, and then acting on it.

(U2, senior-level manager, university 1, arts)

Without a global state, there is no overarching organisation that implements global public good. Interviewees offered little on how global public good was generated, except to see both the production of global public good outcomes and their value through a solely national lens.

If you’ve got a good enough quality higher education system and research base then you can understand and import and benefit from research advances happening in the rest of the world ...

(P-3, previous policy maker)

Aside from collaborative research, the two practical areas that received the most attention were universities’ aid-oriented activities in emerging countries (e.g. U5, P14, U18) and the onshore education of international students. Some interviewees judged cross-border activity in terms of economic cost–benefit, while others pushed back against the commercial approach, but it was generally agreed that international numbers had grown not to build capacity in other countries or contribute to the global good but ‘because overseas students pay higher fees’ (especially U1, see also U2, U11, U19; see also Marginson et al. this Issue).

Overall, the interviewees were less engaged by the question concerning global public good(s) than the discussion of the public good role in national UK society. No university leaders who handled international relations were included in the study. A lack of global-mindedness, nuance, and perhaps imagination was evident, especially in the comments on international education, despite the weight of international students in England.

Discussion and conclusions

Almost all interviewees saw higher education as generating a complex set of individual and collective outcomes with heterogeneous benefits, consistent with Robbins (1963) and Dearing (1997) but flatly contradicting Browne (2010) and Augar (2019), in which higher education’s contribution was seen solely or largely as individualised economic benefits. Interviewees also largely rejected the notion that public and private benefits were zero-sum (i.e. the more an outcome is ‘public’ the less it is ‘private’ and vice versa), except when financing was discussed. They recycled the New Labour contradiction of the Dearing report, which combined expansive socially engaged higher education with the Treasury line on private benefits to justify fees. This contrary coupling was seen as inevitable, or not

discussed. Interviewees wanted Robbins outcomes, but they had resigned themselves to Browne financing.

Public good emptied out

English policy on the public good outcomes of higher education has been hi-jacked, reworked, and emptied out in Treasury's long successful drive to implement a fee-based market. One sign of this was the heightened awareness among interviewees of graduate earnings and employability. It was different when it came to public good outcomes: the non-pecuniary benefits for individuals and collective benefits for society. The intention to value those outcomes was there, but the competence and the energy to do so were not. These capable and experienced interviewees, including half a dozen national leaders, found it difficult to express themselves persuasively on the public good. Many proffered tentative examples or proxies like the KEF. But there was no sharp and shared concept of public good.

In the passage from Robbins to Browne and Augar, education and research had been locked down by financial accountability, risk assessment, product formats, and competitive performance measures in limited and stratifying domains. Because there was no consensus about definitions and measures of public good outcomes, their financing, or the respective roles of government and institutions, there could be no effective challenge to the idea of private pecuniary outcomes as universal descriptors of higher education in England.

The government in England tightly regulated private goods to fashion them as economic commodities. While enforcing standardised tuition from the centre it collected data on pecuniary outcomes and thereby calibrated the 'value' of courses on an unequal basis against the standardised price, automatically generating a precisely ranked hierarchy (Augar, 2019; Belfield et al., 2018). If there was a broader Robbins/Dearing public role as interviewees wanted, it was sustained by the institutions and financed by their students. The institution-driven public good was more explicit in the regional university. In the global university, it was mostly about research. But in a centralised monarchical polity, devolved agents like single higher education institutions had a weak capacity to shape either discourse or outcomes. English higher education had become so individualised that even the collective public good role of research was being partly financed by international student tuition fees.

The Samuelson myth, about a private/public ratio of costs driven by a private/public ratio of benefits, was entrenched in the policy and public spaces. The claim was on shifting sands. No one could define the economic value of public benefits on a comprehensive and conclusive basis. However, the unambiguous fact of measurable private benefit was rhetorically powerful, and that sustained the politics of marketisation.

Like Tomlinson's (2017) students, the interviewees were both inside and outside the market. They moved between day-to-day university life and the ideals unfulfilled. Regulation, accountability for spare public outcomes, and 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 a neoliberal English kind. In abstract, all of higher education was seen to be contained in the public good (at least for some), but that public good had also morphed into a competition game framed by performance indicators.

Since the conduct of the interviews the gloomy expectations of Brown (2011), Shattock and Horvath (2020), and Scott (2021) have been realised. Institutions struggle to survive

on their own behalf yet in the centralised system they are still hostages to policy fortune. Between 2017 and mid-2024, the time of writing, there was no increase in the level of domestic student tuition, which lost 22% of its value. The only compensating source was international student revenues, but in 2024, the number of international student visas was reduced. Under the coalition and then Conservative neoliberal governments of 2010–2024 the state in England had withdrawn not only from the public good outcomes of higher education, but from higher education itself as a public good. On 4 July 2024 a new Labour government took office with the choice of either continuing the neoliberal universal market established in 2012 or fashioning a new approach to public and private good in higher education.

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Declarations

Competing interests The authors declare there are no competing interests.

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