Higher Education (2025) 89:29–52
https://doi.org/10.1007/s10734-024-01341-8

Problems of the public good in higher education: building the common amid sovereign individualism, capital and the state

Simon Marginson[1]

Accepted: 20 October 2024 / Published online: 9 November 2024

Abstract
Anglophone societies in which the sovereign individual is primary vis and vis social relations, and policy focuses on economic competition and consumption in education, find it hard to grasp non-pecuniary outcomes in higher education. These include the self-formation of students as persons and collective goods like knowledge, technological capability, social inclusion, political connectedness, tolerance and global understanding. While other cultures generate insights into non-pecuniary outcomes, the paper focuses critically on meanings of 'public' in English: (1) public as state, (2) public good as universal well-being, (3) public as inclusive-communicative as in 'public opinion', (4) public and private goods in economics. None of these meanings of 'public' enables the resolution of the non-pecuniary outcomes of higher education. The paper tackles four central questions. First, why is there an undue emphasis on the individual and individualised pecuniary benefits, vis a vis social relations, in Euro-American and especially Anglophone societies? Second, can these societies strengthen public or common goods by augmenting the state in higher education? Third, what other practices of public and common might advance non-pecuniary outcomes? Fourth, how to advance collective outcomes beyond the nation-state? The paper finds that while Anglophone public good is constrained by the state in capitalist society, higher education's role in the production and distribution of common good through primarily local networks, while also pressuring central states to provide support, offers a promising way forward.

Keywords Higher education · Public good · Common good · Collective goods · Global common good · Higher education policy · Individualism

✉ Simon Marginson
simon.marginson@education.ox.ac.uk

[1] Department of Education, University of Oxford, 15 Norham Gardens, Oxford OX2 6PY, UK

Introduction

This Special Issue of *Higher Education* on 'The public good of higher education: A comparative study' follows 8 years of research in ten countries (Brewis & Marginson, 2024). The research inquiry started from concerns that policies in many countries placed undue emphasis on higher education as a source of pecuniary benefits, for individual graduates, of a transactional kind, including augmented earnings associated with degrees, immediate employability and social status. Pecuniary outcomes are important, but the emphasis is undue because the collective benefits for society—the social, public or common good effects of higher education—are being neglected by policy. The many collective effects of higher education include its contributions to knowledge and innovation, combined rather than just individual productivity, technological capabilities, literacy, communications, opportunities and social inclusion, political awareness and connectedness, the development of cities and regions, public health, cultural activities, tolerance, cross-cultural and international understanding and many other domains (Marginson et al., 2023; McMahon, 2018), In addition, the broader non-pecuniary benefits for individuals, their formation as lifelong-learning humans with capability and agency (Marginson, 2024), are also neglected.

A further problem is the zero-sum logic of economic policy discussion about higher education, in which the individual and collective benefits are seen to exclude each other. This framework is mobilised to support the transfer of funding responsibility from the state to students by defining a category of purely private benefit and pumping it up discursively in size and scope. Yet in the real world, both the non-pecuniary and pecuniary benefits received by individuals are positive from the point of view of society. Any augmentation of individual students spills over into a richer relational community, a fact lost when higher education is imagined as individualised commodities that are the object of market transactions.

The lop-sided emphasis on individualised pecuniary benefits is a feature of policy in the Anglophone countries, the United States (US), Canada, United Kingdom (UK), Australia and New Zealand[1]—see the papers in this Issue on the UK (Marginson & Yang, 2024) and Canada (Brewis et al., 2024). Anglophone governments animated by neoliberalism in policy (Olssen & Peters, 2005), and Samuelson's (1954) reasoning from economics, see higher education as part of and servant of the capitalist economy and have installed market competition between institutions stratified in value and university-as-business and student-as-consumer models in governance. Some of this has entered policy reforms elsewhere, for example France (Carpentier & Courtois, 2024), Finland (Brewis, 2024) and Chile (Guzman-Valenzuela, 2024), and has impacted higher education in China, though without excluding collective goals (Tian & Liu, 2024).

Non-pecuniary outcomes: terminology

In relation to the non-pecuniary outcomes of higher education, the threshold issue is one of terminology and meaning—what concepts can be used to understand those outcomes? The research project underlying this Special Issue has identified various terms, in different languages, used to describe non-pecuniary outcomes of higher education, especially collective outcomes. Though the terms in different languages overlap in meaning, the distinctive connotations of each can augment shared understanding (Brewis & Marginson, 2024).

[1] Differences between the political cultures of the Anglophone countries are not explored here, though they matter. The paper focuses on common elements. Its generalisations rest largely on the US and UK.

Consider four contrasting examples. In French, 'intérêt general' refers to a common public interest sustained by the state (Carpentier & Courtois, 2024). In Finland, 'the sivistys university is based on the principles of research-based education, subjective self-formation, ethical cultivation and critical engagement between theoretical knowledge and practical social issues' (Brewis, 2024). In Korean, 'jeong' is an emotion experienced in human relationships that are nurturing and long lasting (Mun & Min, 2022). In China, 'tianxia weigong', which is more global than national, refers to outcomes that benefit everyone and require concerted contributions from all (Yang & Chen, 2024).

The present paper works with the terms used in English, where the main discussion of non-pecuniary outcomes is about 'public good' and 'public goods'. 'Common good' is used less often, though it might be more explanatory, as is discussed below. English is the language of use in this research project, and the Anglophone terms have significance beyond the Anglophone zone, particularly through the economics of higher education. However, the intention is not to universalise the English language discourse: far from it. After all, the English language discussion only partly encompasses intérêt general and has no direct equivalent of sivistys, jeong or tianxia weigong. Rather, the intention is to 'provincialise' the Anglophone discourse (Chakrabarty, 2007): to locate it in the Anglophone political culture so as to better explain what it illuminates and creates and what it suppresses from view.

English has multiple and partly contradictory meanings associated with 'public'. The Shorter Oxford Dictionary entry for 'public' has two full columns totalling 44 cm of the printed edition (OED, 1993, 2404–2405). As noted elsewhere (Marginson & Yang, 2022; Brewis & Marginson, 2024), among the multiple meanings are four primary strands: (1) 'public' meaning state or government as in 'public sector'; (2) '*the* public good' as a condition of universal welfare, well-being or beneficence; (3) public as a universal communicative population, as in 'public opinion' or 'the public sphere' (Fraser, 1990) and (4) 'public goods' as half of a dualism with private goods, as used in marginalist economics (Marginson, 2018; Samuelson, 1954). All of these meanings of 'public' in English connect with higher education, and the first and last embody the main Anglophone approach to policy. The present paper works with and explores these Anglophone usages of 'public' and 'common', making selected reference to practices elsewhere.

Non-pecuniary outcomes: underlying questions

Though much can be learned from the lexical variations, the inquiry in the present paper here is not into terminology per se but into policy, particularly the neglect of non-pecuniary outcomes. The paper pursues thoughts that have arisen from the research papers and discussions. Specifically, it sets out to answer four questions:

1. *Why* is there an undue focus on the individual and on individualised pecuniary benefits of higher education, especially in the Anglophone jurisdictions?
2. Is augmentation of the role of *the state* the path to greater recognition and provision of non-pecuniary outcomes, especially collective social outcomes?
3. What *other* modes of 'public' or 'common' might advance the non-pecuniary outcomes of higher education?
4. How can collective outcomes of higher education be advanced in the *global* scale (Marginson, 2022) beyond the nation-state?

These questions are now addressed in turn, followed by conclusions.

Why the focus on the individual to the exclusion of the social?

John Dewey (1927) remarks that it is absurd to place individual and society in antithesis. It is like the relationship between the alphabet and the individual letters: the one cannot exist without the other (p. 186). In any community, people are shaped by their engagement in social relations, while at the same time, all societies are comprised of individual members.

Lev Vygotsky's (1978) studies of child development in the Soviet Union in the 1920s provide an empirically based account of how the formation of the individual is co-existent and interdependent with social relations. Vygotsky finds that pro-active agency is hard-wired into the infant, like the desire for food. Yet the self does not evolve independently. It passes through the social loop of a speech community. The infant reaches out, smiles and draws adults into speech exchange, first with noises and then with words. Through the developing facility in language, children establish their social identities and capabilities while at the same time patterning their inner mentalities. '*An interpersonal process is transformed into an intrapersonal one*. Each function in the child's cultural development appears twice, first, on the social level, and later, on the individual level' (Vygotsky 1986, p. 36, emphasis in original). Individual agency and social structure are ontologically distinct, co-existent and also causally joined in sequences (Archer, 1995). Neither agency nor language community is primary. The child's behaviour is neither solely called forth by external stimuli nor solely governed from within.

How then does it become possible in the Euro-American ('Western') world to imagine an autarkic individual separated from social relations? How can England focus only on the individualised pecuniary benefits in higher education (Marginson & Yang, 2024)?

Many have discussed Euro-American (Western) individualism. Accounts of English political theory begin with Aristotle (Morrison, 2013) and Cicero, their intersection with medieval scholars, and the protestant reformation with its self-responsibility for salvation and material prosperity (Weber, 1905/2002). Colonialism offered riches without limit to buccaneers operating outside the law and morality. The Enlightenment saw a pre-given natural person; the French revolution was said by its critics to foster an 'individuality' that would destroy 'the commonwealth' (Lukes, 1973, p. 3); for nineteenth century romantics, each person had unique sensibilities. The rise of the self-making individual has become a staple of social theory. But the question is not about the autonomous individual per se, which can take many different forms (e.g. for contemporary individualism in China, see Yan, 2009), and is not necessarily antagonistic to social relationality. It is about the Euro-American and especially Anglophone refusal of interdependency and the collective good.

This refusal is so fundamental as to suggest more than policy doctrine is entailed. There is a shared social imaginary (Taylor, 2004), in which self-referencing individuals ignore their social conditions and their obligations to others. In Anglophone political cultures, the stand-alone *sovereign individual* took hold, integrated with the emerging capitalist economy, as Weber realised. In the work of his final period which investigates the care of the self and self-formation, scattered across various texts, lectures, transcribed seminars and notes, Michel Foucault (2005, 2011, 2020, 2021) develops a novel explanation for the genesis of Euro-American individualism in the transition from Ancient Roman practices to Christianity.

Foucault on the negation of the social

Ancient Rome, the cradle of Euro-America, was not an individualist society. People were enmeshed in a lattice of social hierarchies, ties, roles and expectations. Foucault (2021) grounds individualism in the mental journey of the early Christians from daily life in time and the world to the better world to come, the imagined afterlife and the community of the elect that was the reward for the faithful. In this mental journey, the actual human society became externalised and separated, in relation to the self. The result of this deeply felt and momentous separation was that in Western societies, with society now externalised from the self, 'the general form of moral conduct' came to take the form of 'respect for the law' understood as an external authority, rather than the work of the self on the self—and that external authority could be more readily set aside. Correspondingly, 'the critique of established morality' became couched as an assertion of 'the importance of the self' that was separated from it (p. 13). In other words, a faultline developed between on one hand the self, and on the other hand society, and the state as the collective repository of society.

On the path to heaven, the gateway was the church, and it constituted its own social order, but as individual responsibility for salvation took hold its capacity to institutionalise individuals was weakened. This released a recurring pattern of rebellion against externalised social authority, targeting both state and church. When Western activists critiqued established morality, that critique was habitually undertaken in the name of the importance of a self that was seen as natural and prior to society (Foucault, 2021, p. 13): in the Renaissance, which returned to Greece and Rome but in the name of the separated self, and in the eighteenth century Enlightenment, and the French and American Revolutions, where the modern Euro-American political cultures were born. Political freedom and economic freedom were joined and interdependent, and the rising sovereign individual was the centrepiece of the new liberal order. For Immanuel Kant, the individual secured freedom from determination by following 'self-made laws' (Svarverud, 2010, p. 206). 'For Kant, moral law is independent not only of society's conventions or traditions but also from anything external to one's own rationality' (Chan, 2014, pp. 135, 152). Foucault's argument explains how the liberal democratic polities were shaped on one hand by the revolt against the externalised authority and, on the other hand, by the ill-defined normative primacy of the individual without social obligations. In the Euro-American world, the key to liberal freedom was not freedom to do, Berlin's (2002) positive freedom, but negative freedom, freedom from constraint. Within its cocoon of private rights, the sovereign individual was supreme.

All Euro-American societies separate the individual from the social to some degree, with varying levels of tension. The collective or common social good is hard to define in societies which ground themselves in the free consent of autonomous individuals (Sievers in Symonds et al., 2022, p. 2). Correspondingly, 'the rise of liberal theory diminished scholarly interest in the common good, as many liberal thinkers contended that individuals best determine their own good without external impositions' (Mazzucato, 2023, p. 3). The extent of separation between the individual and the social varies within the Euro-American zone. Nordic countries equate the state with society, and see the state as comprehensive in collective responsibility, with an obligation to foster equal conditions for all individuals; or did so until neoliberal economics began to affect state policy (Valimaa & Muhonen, 2018; Brewis, 2024). The French revolution foregrounded fraternity as well as freedom and equality, and the French Republican model sees the state as constituting the civil and private spheres within which individuals flourish, though an aristocracy of capital sustains unequal individuals. But in Anglophone countries, the sovereign individual standing

alone is much the largest figure in the landscape. Anti-statism and resistance to taxation are standard political tropes, especially in the US.

Anglophone political culture

It was not always thus. In Enlightenment Scotland, Adam Smith sought to constrain the post-feudal state while enlarging the space for both the market (Smith, 1776/1937) and civil association (Smith, 1759/2002). He also sought to mobilise a modernised state to provide for the common conditions of life, including public education. However, it was Smith's statement about the invisible hand, the virtuous outcomes that flowed from unregulated markets, that became primary in Anglophone political discourse, not his focus on shared social bonds. In the late twentieth century, this culminated in neoliberalism in government.

There were and are other strands of Anglophone thought. All political cultures are heterogeneous to some degree. Anglophone polities were and are affected by socialist, communitarian and other currents, home grown and from Europe. In the UK, Keynesian liberalism advocated state economic intervention to compensate for macro-level market failure. Following World War II, labourist social democracy created a welfare state, with a universal National Health Service and nationalisation of key industries. But after the mid-1980s, led by US President Ronald Reagan and UK Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher, market fundamentalism was installed at the heart of Anglophone government. The sole rationale of the state became to optimise the conditions for capital accumulation. In this setting, public sector production was as an obstacle to be removed, or alternately, a new opportunity for capital accumulation via privatisation. Welfare state features were largely dismantled, with the electorally protected exception of income transfers to persons.

At the time of writing in October 2024, the UK's universal National Health Service had just managed to survive, the only Anglophone health system free on delivery to all comers. However, the trajectory of higher education has been different. Though it was free to domestic students until 1998, by 2012 it was fully marketised, except in Scotland. A £9000 tuition fee ceiling was introduced for all domestic first-degree places, with zero government funding in most of those places, so that students financed the public goods produced in higher education as well as the private goods. English higher education is now 'hyper-commodified' when compared to the rest of the world, even the other Anglophone liberal polities (Boliver & Promenzio, 2024), though as noted, all Anglophone countries now model higher education as competitive consumption-investment in private pecuniary benefits.

Neoliberal economic policy assumes methodological individualism, 'a doctrine about explanation which asserts that all attempts to explain social (or individual) phenomena are to be rejected … unless they are couched wholly in terms of facts about individuals' (Lukes, 1973, p. 110). In other words, collective relations and collective good as such are impossible. As Thatcher (1987) famously stated, in a *Women's Own* interview: 'Society? There is no such thing. There are individual men and women and there are families'. Methodological individualism has been so institutionalised that some live it from the ground up. Studies of English student attitudes to higher education identify multiple ideas of the purposes of higher education, in which personal development, knowledge-based learning, preparation for work, graduate earnings and doing good in the world all figure. However, a minority of students have adopted the student-as-consumer notion fostered by official policy (Tomlinson, 2017). Remarking on social media during an academic symposium on the neglect of the common good, Clara Miller notes 'an increase

in self-actualisation' without any connection to a sense of social obligation. 'One gets accustomed to negotiating one's own reality, losing touch with the notion of the common good' (Symonds, et al. 2022, p. 3).

In Anglophone polities, notions of solidarity, and the state as the positive repository of the collective will and pivot of social interdependency, are weaker than elsewhere. Questions of social order and individual social responsibility boil down to conformity (or not) with the law as an external authority, as Foucault suggested, and was apparent in the COVID-19 pandemic. It is not just a question of the primacy of the sovereign individual; it is a particular kind of sovereign individual, understood as *homo economicus*, the self-realising economic agent. Though liberalism began with simultaneous political and economic freedom, Euro-American societies now differ in their configurations of the two. In Anglophone liberalism, the freedom to trade and accumulate capital is foundational to all other freedoms: political, social, cultural and intellectual. *The Economist* magazine is a sophisticated version of this position. In the US and UK, capitalism is always the bottom line, a position that is sustained by the hegemonic global role of the US:

> It was in the United States that "individualism" primarily came to celebrate capitalism and liberal democracy. It became a symbolic catchword of immense ideological significance, expressing all that at various times has been implied in the philosophy of natural rights, the belief in free enterprise, and the American dream (Lukes, 1973, p. 26).

This conditions the possibilities and limits of the public good in higher education. It naturalises the idea that universities and research serve not society but the capitalist economy, consisting of sovereign individuals who maximise their capital accumulation. The fatal flaw of Euro-American and especially Anglophone society is the manner in which sovereign individualism blocks the full recognition and practice of collective social relations. When individuals' only obligations are to themselves and the family is the horizon of collectivity, Thatcher's 'no such thing as society' starts to become real. It is a fatal flaw because the unconstrained pursuit of capital accumulation by self-referencing individuals has brought the global ecology to the brink of destruction. A key challenge and obligation of Anglophone higher education is to push back hard against the model of students as a self-interested consumer whose only obligations are to themselves as individuals, and foster in the learning process a recognition of the essential collective interdependency of people with nature and each other (Stein et al., 2020). It needs to become widely understood that collective awareness is complementary, not antagonistic, to individual rights. Individuals need society and vice versa. The 1948 United Nations Declaration of Human Rights does not forget the social. Article 29 of the Declaration states 'everyone has duties to the community in which alone the free and full development of his [sic] personality is possible' (UN, 2024).

Is augmentation of the 'public' as state the path to collective good?

Of the terms that Anglophone society has for imagining 'the community' as an ideal type, the most prominent is 'the public good'. The norm of *the* public good generates its own consent, at least in principle. Who can oppose universal good? It would be like campaigning against the sunrise. But fine words are not enough. How is the shared public good to be defined and implemented? In the attempt to establish a consensus on that question, the wheels start to fall off.

The normative-universal public good

In English, the generic '*the* public good' is understood as a condition of universal welfare or beneficence (Mansbridge, 1998). This has lexical near equivalents in most countries in this study (see Table 5 in Brewis & Marginson, 2024). It sits alongside parallel concepts of the general interest, such as democracy, or ecological sustainability. There are least four problems with the generic public good in the Anglophone jurisdictions. First, it is not only broad it is vague. Second, there are no practical mechanisms for democratically determining values, programmes and priorities for achieving the public good, despite near universal support for norms of democracy. Third, amid the competing claims for the definition of the public good, some claims are more potent than others; public good is overdetermined by relations of power in highly unequal capitalist societies. Fourth, in societies in which everyone pursues their own interest, the determination of the public good rests finally with the state, but the state is shaped by these same unequalising structures of social power.

On the first point, *the* public good is what social theorists call a 'thin' concept. Despite its powerful affective appeal, 'it lacks the depth of meaning conferred by historically lived experience' (Sievers in Symonds et al., 2022, p. 2). The UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) constitute a broad statement premised on the public or common good. The SDGs illustrate the limitations of big inclusive normative concepts that cover everything but in practice specify nothing. The SDGs are so broadly worded and interpreted that anyone can endorse them, including companies that routinely destroy the ecology. The SDGs pose a shared agenda, but the inclusive rhetoric is a substitute for transformative action. So it is with most uses of '*the* public good'. The more specific is the discussion, the more difficult it becomes to hold an agreement about the content of the public good. The general interest is in fact highly politicised and open to numerous conflicting interests, meanings and claims.

Second, there is the question of how that diversity is handled. In itself, the diversity of meanings and agendas of the public good is no bad thing. It is how the world works, it is the source of continuous change, and it creates the possibility that things can be different. Individual people and their networks, organisations like universities and (on a good day) nations all learn and grow though their engagement with difference. Moreover, the fact of difference does not preclude the possibility of achieving commonality on crucial points about living together in a relational society, such as religious toleration, freedom from violence, respect for nature, or universal rights to education. The diversity about the nature of the public good should be the starting point for conversation and negotiation around such questions as 'what is the public good and how does higher education contribute to it?', 'who decides?' and 'how should this be discussed and determined?' There is no such conversation. This is because the public good is pre-set. Standard tropes of the capitalist economy, national security and sovereign individualism are relentlessly imposed by states, corporations and mainstream media which are mostly in corporate hands. Not only many public good agendas but also the very possibility of negotiation has been closed off.

Third, this is because relations of power pre-structure the potentials of the public good. The diversity of claims on the public good does not take the form only of flat pluralism. It is also articulated through a class and capital hierarchy in which social and political fracture are inevitable, collective relations are fragmented, and powers to move resources and shape public agendas (Lukes, 2021) are highly unequal. Even in ecology, where the common problem is very obvious and the case for collaborative action is overwhelming, powerful interests consistently block the possibility of implementing cross-class and cross-sectoral practices.

In capital-based economies, notions of shared good vary on the basis of socio-economic location. For example, in Anglophone higher education systems that are stratified in value, elite families invest privately to maximise their odds of entering the top institutions, while poor families are largely excluded from them. For elite families, the public good lies in the normal workings of the stratified system. For poor families, it lies in an egalitarian system with institutions similar in resources and status, so there is little to be gained by investing privately. There are no prizes for guessing which blueprint for the public good tends to prevail. For business, one measure of public good is accumulative prosperity, such as GDP (this defined public good for some interviewees in the Canadian study: see Brewis et al. 2024). For those who gain nothing from business profitability, public good lies instead in an economic redistribution in their favour, subtracting from the capital accessed by business. But significant redistribution is off the agenda in Anglophone political economies.

Interestingly, within Anglophone higher education, there is more plurality of values and agendas than in Anglophone government. This is because higher education institutions have partial autonomy, they are not political clones of the central state apparatus, and different parts of higher education service different notions of public good. Ecological research feeds into global sustainability; teacher training fosters social opportunity in education; business studies focuses on economic accumulation as an end in itself, mostly with token regard for social inequalities and ecological devastation. Typically, the 'multiversity' (Kerr, 1963) sits between wildly conflicting public goods and maintains a stake in all. It practices extensive climate change research and often takes extensive money from fossil fuel companies and agribusiness. The contradiction is not sourced in corruption or absent-minded errors by university leaders, it is endemic to the Euro-American university as an organisational form. Its own survival and flourishing, and the augmentation of its social prestige and power, are always primary, and its multiple and contrary connections have served it well. If individual institutions wanted to coherently serve the public good, they would resolve what it is and negotiate between stakeholders. On the whole, they prefer to keep all the balls in the air.

The miscellany of its activities shows that higher education harbours another kind of shared outcome which is as salient as public good. That is public *bad*. This too is subject to conflicting interpretations, but might include research for war machines, or inequalities in stratified education systems. If higher education wants to be coherent about public good, an early question is: 'does the shared public good we make outweigh the shared public bad?'.

Can the state in capitalist society generate collective public good through higher education?

Fourth, there is the question of the state and its relations with public good.

The most straightforward meaning of 'public', found in all eight countries in the present research, is the public as the state or public sector. The state includes multiple agencies, many state funded and all state regulated, coordinated at the centre of government. All Euro-American polities operate on the basis of a division of powers between the central machinery of state, the economic market, civil society and the domain of family and individual. The state machine is further divided into executive, legislature and judiciary. The semi-autonomous university is another piece in this mosaic (Marginson & Yang, 2022). Notwithstanding the division of powers, the Euro-American states exercise a general supervisory responsibility, underpinned by law making and financial power. This role varies, from the comprehensive Nordic state in Finland through to the Anglophone

countries with their tight boundary lines between the central state, semi-autonomous public agencies like universities and the different private zones. All Euro-American states are limited liberal states, but whereas in continental Europe universities were often positioned within the state public service and have become more autonomous only in the neoliberal period, the autonomy of Anglo-American universities has long been fiercely defended. Yet that autonomy does not translate into wholly independent scope to define a role in public good.

In all eight countries in this study, higher education has been nested in the state since the massification of higher education began (Cantwell et al., 2018). There is variation in the form and intensity of that embeddedness, but for institutions, especially those located in the public sector, as are nearly all of the institutions in this study, it is unproblematic for them to contribute to nation building and national needs. Differences in the history and character of the nation-states are the main driver of variations in the case studies in this project. In some of the countries under study, higher education is positioned in long-standing endogenous narratives concerning its public role. France has its state-supervised Republican tradition grounded in universal citizen rights (Carpentier & Courtois, 2024); Finland has the sivistys idea, whereby graduates bring self-development and knowledge to society and state (Brewis, 2024); and Chile has the Latin American Cordoba tradition of the agentic role of universities in social modernisation and transformation (Guzman-Valenzuela, 2024). All three country studies note, however, that these national narratives are being partly undermined by imported Anglophone ideas of public/private goods in higher education.

Regardless of the anti-statism in some political cultures, in all eight countries in this study the state is the sole formal repository of the collective will. Is augmentation of the role of the state the path to better non-pecuniary outcomes in higher education, especially collective outcomes?

That would require a disinterested state that separates itself from any and every particular interest to resolve public good on behalf of society as an interdependent whole. This raises the question of whether the state in capitalist society can secure sufficient autonomy in relation to economic forces and class-based interests. There is no lack of examples of states that are the 'committee for managing the common affairs of the whole bourgeoisie', as Marx and Engels (1848/2014) put it in the *Communist Manifesto*. There is also no lack of states captured by landed property, military power, sectional religion, or political conspiracies. There are also rarer cases of states that have been able to secure full autonomy to act in their own right, operating across different forces and agents. It depends on the configuration of forces, the capabilities of the state, and conditions and timing.

In the present study, no state can implement higher education policy while outside the gravitational pull of economic, social or political hierarchies. This is apparent in both the favourable access to prestigious universities enjoyed by elite families, and the integration of higher education into economic policies focused on national capital accumulation.

In the last three decades, in all countries in this project, higher education policy has been impacted by neoliberalism (though less in Poland than elsewhere, see Szadkowski, 2024). Everywhere, higher education and national science are seen as engines of national economic prosperity, part of the 'global knowledge economy' (Dale, 2005) and sources of the nation's global competitiveness, according to the neoliberal template. Universities are modelled as self-managed and partly self-funded corporations, focused on efficiency and the student-customer. Institutional autonomy is real but regulated by competition and performative regimes through which the state shapes behaviours. The extent of neoliberal economic embeddedness (both discursive and instrumental) varies, but the bottom line is

that everywhere, higher education and research are seen as servants of capitalism and, via their embeddedness in the state, are beholden to the strong players in the economy. (In China, the configuration is different to Euro-America, in that economy works for the party-state rather than vice-versa, but the impact in higher education is often similar). Hence the main focus of state policy on research is its contribution to profitable innovations; and the main focus of policy on the education function is graduate employability, the generation of high productivity 'job-ready graduates' as one government has put it (Australian government, 2024).

This embeddedness in economic policy imposes a shared limitation on individual learning, knowledge and the collective contributions of higher education in all eight countries. If the public sector genuinely accepted an obligation to serve the general good, it would be an output maximiser. It would be constrained only by the boundaries of time and materiality. However, the Samuelson formula pulls it back into the world of scarcity, competition, zero-summism and the prioritisation of the economic over the social. Again, the constraint plays out in varying ways, but neoliberalism in government will always tend to minimise the open potentials of state-sanctioned public good in higher education.

One reason is the top-down nature of neoliberal economic governance. In Anglophone countries, which implement neoliberalism more rigorously than most others, there are no processes whereby local communities can monitor and affect outcomes and, hence, no pressure on the state to pursue a hard-edged policy of equitable redistribution. A second reason is that most states refuse the broad potential of public-as-state. In the Anglophone world, there is popular scepticism about claims by the state to embody the public good, and also reluctance by the state to create the kind of broad obligations that prevail in the Nordic and Chinese systems. Both factors empty out the public good (Marginson & Yang, 2024).

All this means that in consistent neoliberal regimes, the outer limit of state-determined public good in higher education is the interests of capital, or at least those fractions of capital recognised by the state. Though state policy as such is always miscellaneous, incorporating competing agencies, interest groups, social agendas like equitable access, political gimmickry, and fragments of old programmes, all of this plays out within the political logic of the capitalist economy.

In the Anglophone states, especially the centralised Westminster systems in the UK, Australia and New Zealand, the nexus between the state and economy is managed by the central financial agencies of government, normally Treasury and the central bank. Treasury is the arbiter of Westminster higher education policy (e.g. for the case of the UK, see Shattock & Horvath, 2020). Beyond Treasury and the US Federal Reserve, capital shapes politics and policy directly through donors and lobbyists (Monbiot, 2024; Reich, 2022), the power of the privately owned tabloid media to discipline politicians in the UK, and the control exercised over US politicians through the funding of their election campaigns. Marx was right. In thoroughly capitalist societies, the notion of a general interest is an illusion. When the state fashions a 'universal' public good in higher education amid the contending claims and multiple agendas, that public good is not general but particular. Capital sets the limits of possibility. In short, higher education for the public good is judged by its contribution to capital accumulation. Institutions and persons might want to practise other kinds of public good, but it is difficult for state-embedded universities to wholistically step outside the state.

In Finland with its strong social democratic tradition, Chile with its present socialist government, and China, the strictly capitalist economic logic is modified by other agendas, and there is a larger potential for collective goods. In the Anglophone world, the limitation on the public good in higher education will remain in place unless there is an epochal

shift in the political culture. The climate-nature emergency may trigger such a shift, though as long as class-based individual aggrandisement is combined with capital accumulation, such a shift is likely to be temporary. Nevertheless, Anglophone prospects are not all black. For example, arguably higher education, with its semi-autonomy and its multiplicity of agendas, fosters a larger potential for collective approaches than is the case in the central state. While across these competitive higher education sectors, broad-based agreement on shared public good agendas is exceptional and hard to hold in place for long, the exceptions are sometimes very important. The COVID-19 pandemic triggered broadly shared medical research and public health agendas within countries, and cooperation between researchers in different countries despite some tensions. The climate-nature emergency fosters much collaboration between scientists, and there, global cooperation is primary.

The extent to which normative public good agendas can be practised holistically in higher education depends on (a) support for collective social goals, including relativisation of the sovereign individual by greater recognition of social and ecological interdependence, and (b) sufficient agreement between institutions and groups on particular social objectives. Normative recognition of interdependence is crucial. Without it, there is no prospect of a Euro-American curriculum that fosters a more collective outlook across in all disciplines and fields of training. In societies that ground themselves principally in the free consent of autonomous individuals, institutions and programmes find themselves constrained on the extent to which they socialise students. Should students be left to make up their own minds, or should responsible educators persuade them to virtue? As so often happens where the Western individual meets the social, this question generates confusion, not consensus.

The functionality of Samuelson

The political nexus between the state and capital explains why Samuelson's (1954) construction of public/private goods continues to frame economic policy in higher education. Samuelson's idea is blatantly incompatible with the intrinsic character of higher education. Knowledge, not an economic commodity but—even in Samuelson's terms—a public good, is at the core of both learning/teaching and research. Higher education institutions make multiple social contributions, but as noted, another and major flaw in Samuelson (1954) is that it excludes nearly all outcomes not individualised pecuniary benefits, actively suppressing recognition of and augmentation of collective goods. Nevertheless, the Anglophone state and capital seem sanguine about this narrowing of the public agenda.

Samuelson's economics are discussed in the previous paper in this Special Issue (see also Marginson, 2018). 'Private goods' are produced for profit in markets. Goods are 'public' when market-based production cannot generate a profit because the goods are non-exclusive or non-rivalrous. Such goods must be financed by states or philanthropy. Within the powerful economic machinery of government, the model is highly normative in intent. As noted, it treats production as either public or private, despite all the interdependencies between public and private activities and interests. The purpose is to maximise the space for capital accumulation while naturalising market relations, though in reality the social character of goods such as higher education is determined by policy (education can be more or less universal, or rendered excludable and rivalrous), and higher education markets are not pre-existent, they are installed

by states. The Samuelson formula leads to minimalist, residual public goods, consistent with an extreme version of the limited liberal state. By minimising the scope for public goods, it also minimises their cost to the state, providing a ready-made argument for private financing: higher education generates private pecuniary goods so the beneficiary should pay. As the Dearing (1997) report stated, when first ushering in tuition fees in the UK: 'There is overwhelming evidence that those with higher education qualifications are the main beneficiaries from higher education in the form of improved employment prospects and pay' (pp. 288–289). At that moment, the vast range of contributions to other beneficiaries, reviewed in the rest of the report, was ignored; Samuelson maximises the scope for private capital in education while providing a means of reducing state spending. It feeds the agendas of both parts of the state-capital nexus.

The public/private goods dualism generates differential treatment of research and teaching. Basic research is non-rivalrous and (once published) non-excludable, a natural public good. Hence, in most systems, university research is state financed. Remarkably, some Anglophone governments ensure that students fund part of university research, primarily through international student fees. Market financing of a designated public good is a more extreme evacuation of collective provision than Samuelson (1954). Meanwhile, in contrast, teaching and certification are treated as unambiguously private, and the public goods they generate are marginalised. Students pass from consumers in the education market to human capital for the labour market. If they are also self-forming subjects of education and knowledge (Marginson, 2024), that is incidental to the value equation. Institutions and programmes with low private earnings, like nurse or teacher education, are defined as bearing low value (Augar, 2019) despite the contribution of health and education services to the combined public good. Non-pecuniary individual goods that are unrewarded in labour markets, such as enhanced citizenship, are treated as externalities or 'spill-overs' from the production of private goods as human capital. Little effort is made by governments to measure the value of externalities (Chapman & Lounkaew, 2015; McMahon, 2018). Meanwhile, the collective outcomes in higher education, which are not manifest as individual spill-overs, are invisible. They vanish from the policy agenda: unmonitored, unfunded and probably unimproved.

Samuelson public goods merely provide conditions facilitating capital accumulation, for example the rule of law. The Samuelson formula is indifferent to the positive role of government and chronically unable to address the equitable distribution of public goods (Mazzucato, 2023). Some Samuelson public goods, like research or free places in elite universities, are open to private capture. In fact, the public/private good regulation of value, like neoliberalism as a whole, increases the public bad of social inequality, by differentiating collective access to higher education, and by combining the unequal value generated by stratified institutions with the unequal access to those unequal outcomes that is provided to unequal social groups. Social stratification becomes tightly aligned to institutional stratification and to stratified outcomes from education. The claim about the trade-off between private benefits and public good becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy. For institutions that are competing to enhance their prestige, it is smarter to build global research or foster high-score student entry than to meet broad social needs. Underfunded third-tier institutions have limited capacity to generate public good. First-tier institutions with greater capacity to contribute to the common are fixated with themselves.

Can other modes of 'public' or 'common' advance collectivity?

If the capitalist state is unable to constitute a universal public good, except at exceptional moments, and the neoliberal state does not foster collective outcomes in higher education, are there other kinds of 'public' that can enhance non-pecuniary individual and collective outcomes? Three possibilities will be discussed: the communicative-inclusive public (the public of 'public opinion'), the public sphere, and the common good.

The communicative-inclusive public

The universal public good is wholly shared and inclusive but also non-existent. However, there is a related sense of 'public', almost as inclusive, that is actually experienced and can be observed empirically. That is 'the public' as a collective noun, in which the public is a single networked body of people, and also adjectival forms such as 'public opinion' and 'public media'. This kind of public has modern origins in the assembly of citizens in the French revolution and after. It intersects discursively with the generic democratic 'electorate' based in universal suffrage and calls up a participatory democratic politics of political parties, town hall meetings and campaigns. In its classical form, the communicative-inclusive public was sustained by newspapers. The reach of this kind of public, and the affective immediacy of engagement, is now much advanced by the Internet. The 2020 census in the UK found that 92 percent of the population were recent users of the Internet (Office for National Statistics, 2024), and in 2023, worldwide Internet penetration had reached 67 percent (Statista, 2004). The technology companies constitute very large conversational platforms in the form of social media.

The relation between the state as public, and the inclusive-communicative public, varies by country and by form of communication, and it is changing in the screen-based era. In Western Europe and the Anglophone countries, the public as an electorate is classically auspiced by the state, though public opinion is also seen to sit in civil society. Yet the Western technology companies are unambiguously grounded in the private sector. In China, there is no electorate but social media enable a flood of communication. The Chinese state controls social media on its own terms, monitoring dissent and inhibiting free conversation. In the US, the boot is on the other foot: the state has been unable to regulate hate speech and fake news, and there is growing state dependence on Google, Facebook/Meta, Instagram and Twitter/X in public administration (Klein, 2020). In *How democracy ends* (2018), David Runciman suggests that social media displaces older forms of public political participation because social media talk is more agentic and compelling. Hence public participation and opinion are increasingly vulnerable to central control by powerful interests.

Higher education has an ambiguous relation with the inclusive-communicative public. It needs social media for routine communication, but its presence there is not electrifying. Institutions find it more difficult than states to address whole populations: higher education includes some but not all of the public, stratifying populations between those who access degrees and those who do not. Its most inclusive public form is in university towns where the institution is often the largest local organisation. Nevertheless, mass higher education is expected to be broadly inclusive (Cantwell et al., 2018). The goal of widening participation on the basis of equity in admission, reflecting shared beliefs that higher education should provide a broad framework of opportunity, is common to all countries in this project with

the partial exception of Poland. Many states support measures to encourage participation, targeting support for social groups under-represented in higher education with varied levels of vigour. In this domain, the neoliberal policy framework is modified by public forms, though access to elite institutions is more fraught and is rarely modified by policy.

The public sphere

The 'public sphere' of Habermas (1989), Fraser (1990) and others is a more localised and purposive kind of participative and communicative public than the whole population. Habermas sources the original public sphere in late seventeenth century London with its network of broadsheets, salons and coffee houses in which people discussed matters of the day. The public sphere, focused on policy, including government errors and alternatives, was a continuing source of intelligence, ideas and talent for the British state. This kind of public sphere, requiring freedom of expression and networked media, is typical of West European polities and flourishes in the US. It has been more episodic in China, for example in the opening up time prior to Tiananmen Square in 1989.

Calhoun (2006) and Pusser (2011) extend the public sphere idea to higher education. They present research-intensive universities as semi-autonomous adjuncts of government that harbour constructive criticism, policy ideas and transformative social movements. The 1960s/1970s US universities harboured the civil rights and antiwar movements, ecological activism, the second wave of feminism and later, LGBTQ activism. These movements were notable for their evolution of deeply collective forms of decision-making, including careful efforts to minimise leadership hierarchies and the differentiating role of status. Ignatieff (2018) argues that in the Western division of powers, the critically minded university is an analogue to a free media and independent judiciary, a counter to majoritarian electoral populism of the kind fostered by the Orban party-state in Hungary. Higher education legislation in New Zealand formally enshrines the idea of the university as 'critic and conscience' of society. The Cordoba Latin American university tradition is another variant (see Guzman-Valenzuela, 2024). Whereas in divided societies, the universal public good is rarely within reach; the localised public sphere collectivises its participants, within boundaries, on the basis of particular shared goods and transformative agendas.

Common good

Like 'public good', the term 'common good' has multiple associations. There is a long history of the commons in rural life. Forms of common ownership range from jointly held private property to egalitarian social space (e.g. in the Catalan Pyrenees, see Vaccaro et al., 2024). 'Common' in economics is associated with shared resources. In 'The tragedy of the commons', Hardin (1968) finds that resources such as grazing land open to unrestricted use inevitably become congested because individuals lacked incentives to restrain their own use: 'Freedom in a commons brings ruin to all' (p. 1244). However, Ostrom (1990, 2010) argues that local communities can manage finite common resources on the basis of negotiated protocols; and not all common goods are non-renewable and rivalrous. Learning, knowledge and social cooperation are common goods not necessarily subject to congestion.

In *Rethinking education: Towards a global common good*, UNESCO (2015) proposes the common good idea in place of public good. Public good is said to be trapped in a limiting economic framework, is unduly state focused, and says nothing about production

and distribution. UNESCO's common good, which is political rather than economic, is designed to address these limitations. Education for the common good embodies local participation in conception and delivery, democracy and equity in distribution, and values of solidarity, tolerance, benevolence, shared individual human rights and freedoms and collective welfare and facilities (Deneulin & Townsend, 2007, p. 24). Understandings of the common good are diverse, and there are differing interests in play, but diversity has educational and social benefits. Differences are reconciled in negotiation. UNESCO common good is fulfilled by private as well as public organisations and entails public–private cooperation. Working with the UNESCO idea, Rita Locatelli (2018) notes that 'some kinds of private participation are more defensible than others' (p. 8) and states need to ensure that private agents fulfil the common good rather than capture it for their own purposes. State action in this domain could be defined as 'public common goods'. Table 1. distinguishes the public and common good.

The common good approach is open to some of but not all the criticisms of the generic public good. Used rhetorically, the common good can also be vague and vacuous. It too faces obstacles in societies structured by sovereign individualism, capital and class. And would not the state still maintain a primary commitment to national capital accumulation? The difference is that the common good approach includes local political mechanisms that can draw broad-based communal support, manage negotiated diversity, transform normative common good into specific policies and reforms and build bottom-up pressure on the top-down states that are in thrall of capital. While neoliberalism has led to the evacuation of central state obligations, collective common goods offer to take responsibility and address problems.

Mariana Mazzucato (2023) argues that common good can be progressed in capitalist societies, provided that is pursued in all of the local–regional, national and global scales. She contrasts the common good approach with both Samuelson and Ostrom. Each is trapped in

Table 1. Comparison of public good and common good concepts

Public good (the various meanings)	Common good
'Public' as the state or government sector	DIFFERENT: common goods can be generated in both public and private sectors
The normative 'public good' as a universally shared condition of welfare or beneficence	SAME: the normative common good also implies a universal condition of beneficence
'Public' meaning socially inclusive and communicative (potentially all citizens)	SIMILAR: though the common good more strongly emphasises equitable distribution
'Public sphere' as zone of discussion and constructive criticism alongside the state	SIMILAR: common good approach implies open extensive discussion, but also implementation
'Public/private goods' assumes the normative primacy of capitalist markets	DIFFERENT: Common good does not assume the primacy of markets, seeing them as tool not goal
'Public goods' are economic goods not produced in markets	DIFFERENT: common good is politically defined and produced both in markets and outside
'Public goods' are non-rivalrous and/or non-excludable	DIFFERENT: common good is not regulated by the rivalry/excludability framework
'Public goods' cannot be private goods and vice versa	DIFFERENT: common goods are shared collective goods in which individual rights are advanced
'Public goods' can be generated by any political form	DIFFERENT: common good presupposes active local democracy, supported by state

Source: author

the same conceptual framework, with the options structured by rivalry/excludability binaries, so there is 'either market failure or state failure' (p. 9). On one hand, Samuelson public good is focused not on creating public goods of value but on supplementing private markets in areas of market failure. However, this is a poor basis for guiding policy because 'conditions of perfect information, completeness and no transaction costs have never been empirically demonstrated', so in any given market, government can intervene to improve the market outcome (p. 6), and because it limits the role of the state to compensation for market failure, with public goods confined to individualised welfare goods and externalities. 'This concept of the state as a market fixer has led to the idea that government should not steer the economy but only enable, regulate and facilitate it' (p. 6), 'rather than setting ambitious objectives and promoting collective action towards achieving them' (p. 2).

> Public good scholarship … treats some of the most systemic problems in global capitalism (e.g. climate change and inequality) as externalities and the results of failures of an otherwise perfect system, rather than questioning the structures (Mazzucato, 2023, p. 6).

On the other hand, Ostrom's (2010) communal management of common-pool resources assumes there is both market failure and state failure. 'Placing the burden of compensating for weak states on communities' negates the possibility of 'the good as an objective to be reached together' (p. 2) in a multi-scalar setting. Mazzucato focuses on the collective character of common good, supplied only to whole communities yet individually shared by their members (pp. 2–3); but while emphasising local communities in collectively determining and producing common goods, she also argues that pro-active government is needed that 'promotes and nurtures co-creation and participation' (p. 10) oriented to 'collective goals' (p. 9). 'Partnerships between the state, business and civil society are a critical component of steering the economy in the right direction'. The common good framework 'is not about enforcing top-down or centralised regulation, but about letting collective processes inform public policy and transnational governance' (p. 13). Decisions about common good should be informed by a politically determined 'theory of public value … collectively negotiated and generated by a range of stakeholders' (p. 10).

The idea of 'public value' needs more development, and Mazzucato might be optimistic about the scope for common good politics in capitalist society, at least in the absence of a significant shift from sovereign individualism to interdependence. But she is right to argue the superiority of the common good concept vis a vis public good (see also Tian & Liu, 2019). 'Public good' and 'public state' taken together are top-down and ambiguous and have been contaminated and residualised by Samuelson's limiting public goods. While in the Euro-American world, especially the Anglophone countries, the obstacles to a more collective policy remain formidable; common good provides a stronger starting point for activism. A difficulty is that the term 'common good' is less recognised than public good. In the present research, it resonated with interviewees only in Poland, and in China, where it is consistent with long traditions of collective values and local modes of organisation (Tian & Lin, 2019).

As Mazzucato states, collective global outcomes can also be seen as common good.

How can global collective outcomes be advanced?

The global common good concept is pertinent in higher education and research, given the sector's thick cross-border collaboration outside the inter-state system (Marginson, 2022). Research universities and science could be instrumental in evolving a global

common good approach at world level. The last three decades have seen massive growth in global communications in higher education, student and academic mobility, cross-border university partnerships and global science. The number of students crossing borders for 1 year or more rose from 1.9 million in 1998 to 6.2 million in 2022 (UNESCO, 2024). This included 24 percent of all doctoral students in OECD countries in 2021 (OECD, 2023, p. 259). The number of science papers in Scopus rose from 1.0 million in 1996 to 3.3 million in 2022, and the proportion with international co-authors was 22.6 percent in 2022 (NSB, 2024). Nevertheless, higher education's potential for global bad as well as good needs to be sorted. For example, commercial cross-border education entails a neo-colonial relation in which economic capital and human talent are drawn from emerging countries to old colonial centres, conflicting with normative common good and the egalitarian relations implied.

Interviewees in all countries in this project saw research and knowledge as the primary domain in which higher education contributes to global common good. Knowledge, central to higher education in teaching/learning as well as scholarship/research, is a natural common good. There are immense shared contributions via research (Witte, 2023). Tian et al. (2024) discuss indicators and measures of global common goods. The worldwide network of universities and scientific institutes constitutes a common space of inquiry under largely free conditions. Knowledge is ontologically relational, collectively accumulated, and when produced and distributed on an open inclusive basis can be broadly beneficial. It is also quintessentially global. Scientists and scholars work across borders, students travel for learning and it is essential they are supported in doing so. Secure mobility is a global common good.

It is also necessary to take the global knowledge commons forward, by expanding it to take in all languages and knowledges. The present hegemonic and neo-colonial form of global science, with globally recognised publishing exclusively in English, though English is the first or second language of just 18 percent of the world population (CIA, 2024), generates global bads (Marginson & Xu, 2023). A common language of use is in the common interest. The exclusion of other languages is not. There is immediate potential to expand the global common in science and scholarship by evolving from hegemonic English-only publishing to shared multi-lingual publishing (Marginson & Xu, 2023) and to flat epistemic collaboration in an ecology of knowledges (Santos 2007). The software is now available to facilitate multi-lingual translation in all directions. It is extraordinary that multi-lingual publishing (which, after all, would expand the market reach of the publishing companies) is yet to be introduced.

There is continuing potential for obstacles and limits to global common good in higher education and knowledge in a nation-bound world, in which methodological nationalism is the prevailing vision (Marginson, 2022), and especially in systems and institutions affected by geopolitical conflict (Moscovitz & Sabzalieva, 2023)—for example the 2016 self-severance of the UK from the European Union, the intimidation of scientists in the US-China Initiative, the destruction of universities in Ukraine, and the part isolation of those in Russia (Marginson, forthcoming). When geopolitical barriers are erected by nation-states, individual institutions, faculty and students are relatively powerless to affect them. In the absence of a global state, an alternative global authority is needed to protect and advance global common good in higher education and science. Such an authority would necessarily rest not on coercion, legal authority or financial power, but on moral suasion sufficient to nurture and protect bottom-up collaboration within and beyond the inter-state system. What principles of conduct could regulate relations in a common global higher education space without inner or outer borders, no 'other'? Yang et al. (2024) find clues in the ancient

Chinese practices of *tianxia*, in which non-coercive relations in the shared borderless space are fostered by protocols and rituals, openness and connectivity, epistemic freedoms, mutual commitment to self-improvement and each other, and unity-in-diversity, in which differences are normal, engaged and valued as a continuing source of learning.

Conclusions

This paper has posed four questions for investigation. Its answers are as follows:

First, why is there an undue focus on individualised pecuniary benefits in higher education, especially in the Anglophone jurisdictions? While the marketisation of higher education has observable political conditions (the triumph of neoliberalism, the weakening of social democracy), it can be sourced most fundamentally to the hegemony of an extreme liberalism grounded in sovereign individualism, dim recognition of the collective conditions of social relations, and the elevation of capital accumulation above all other goals. Modern Anglophone societies practice greater collectivism only in existential crisis, such as world war. The hard truth is that it may require the impending catastrophe of the climate-nature emergency to jog these societies into understanding of their actual interdependency. This creates a difficult policy landscape for higher education institutions, everywhere legally and financially embedded in states, and sometimes (e.g. in the US private sector) also financially embedded with major donors. However, Anglophone institutions and people are capable of pushing a little ahead, pursuing more collaborative relations than are typical of the states and societies in which they are nested. Most institutions have some scope for independent action (that varies by country, and institutional resources and prestige), especially in research and global activity. Individual faculty, disciplinary networks and student organisations have significantly more freedom than institutional leaders to pursue their own agendas.

Second, is augmentation of the state-as-public the path to greater recognition and provision of non-pecuniary outcomes? While the Anglophone state is formally public, the fact must be faced that in contrast with certain other Euro-American states, it is captured politically by the commanders of capital and focused on their accumulation projects. Neoliberal policy control, orchestrated by Treasury departments in each country, is largely complete. Regardless of the political choices they are offered, electorates simply cannot secure the desired changes in policy sufficient to reground collective services and abolish poverty. Hence, states are too deeply embedded in the politics of capital accumulation to consistently pursue non-pecuniary outcomes in higher education. This has emptied out Anglophone meanings of 'the public good', shrinking the collective domain to the residual 'public goods' permitted by neoliberal economics, without even state financing of all of those public goods. To sustain its defunding of higher education and the imposition of exceptional student fees, the Anglophone state proceeds as if collective outcomes of higher education do not exist.

Third, what other modes of 'public' or 'common' might advance the non-pecuniary outcomes of higher education? Mainstream Anglophone policy frameworks have become decoupled from the larger contributions of higher education (Marginson et al., 2023). To retrieve those contributions, it is necessary to start over. A new language for non-pecuniary activity is needed, with clear and robust concepts. One place to look is the non-Anglophone jurisdictions. Terms and policies are embedded in cultures and do not move en bloc, but the present project has identified suggestive approaches in France, Finland,

Poland, Japan, China and Chile that paralle public and common good in higher education. A second place to look is 'common good'. This is associated with more collective social relations, distributional equality, local negotiations and bottom-up implementation. The common good strategy is a counter to the capture of top-down state machinery by capitalist economics. Many higher education institutions are already sufficiently embedded in their local settings to pursue the common good approach. The bottom-up dynamic can foster an ongoing critical reflexivity in the public sphere in relation to state policy and, in the longer term, might help in detaching the machinery of state from the interests of capital. Bottom-up collaboration alone is not enough to sustain collective outcomes, and a common goods politic needs to be networked across localities. The harder challenge is to build sufficient pressure on capital-captured states, so they support the common good approach: creating society-wide cooperation between regions, public infrastructure and business; negotiating Mazzucato's (2023) *public value* in place of economic value; and guarding the common good against private capture. *Public common goods* refer to state support for higher education as common good.

Fourth, how can collective outcomes be advanced in the global scale? The global common good provides a discursive framework for global cooperation. The last three decades have shown that higher education and knowledge have notable potentials in cross-border relations. Much is achieved in often testing geopolitical conditions. However, it is essential to move beyond neocolonialism, as manifest in the Anglophone closure of all other knowledge, and the exploitative market in international education, in what is an increasingly multi-polar higher education world (Marginson, forthcoming). A move to multi-lingual publishing all-round would show respect and could profoundly change the landscape of global knowledge. This paper also suggests a higher education sector-oriented *regulatory mechanism for global common goods*, based on consent, moral persuasion and shared values including free open exchange, universal inclusion and the valuation of diversity (see also Yang et al., 2024).

States are not the whole of the social, and all sectors have partial scope to fashion their own trajectory. Anglophone higher education has a choice. Does it burrow ever deeper into the 'knowledge economy' market imaginary, faithfully practising the rules of combat and control while taking the less than spectacular rewards on offer: day-to-day survival, and a few places up the *Times Higher Education* ranking in a good year? Or does it regroup and recapture a stronger sense of its own multiple missions and its vast potential to augment both individual persons and collective social relations? The plain fact is that the present policy economics cannot grasp that potential: it is nowhere near understanding it, and it never will. It is hard to break the mould, but the sector needs to tackle its own rules of existence. Only higher education itself, grounded in local–regional communities, engaged creatively in the nation and world, and building the potentials of its own people as a communicative-critical public sphere, can break out of the limitations currently imposed on it and remake itself as a common good.

Funding The research was conducted in the ESRC/OFSRE Centre for Global Higher Education and funded by the UK Economic and Social Research Council (awards ES/M010082/1, ES/M010082/2 and ES/T014768/1).

Declarations

Conflict of interest The author declares no competing interests.

References

Archer, M. (1995). *Realist social theory: The morphogenetic approach*. Cambridge University Press.

Augar, P. (Chair of committee). (2019). Independent panel report to the review of post-18 education and funding.https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/805127/Review_of_post_18_education_and_funding.pdf

Australian government. (2024). *Job-ready graduates package*. Department of Education. https://www.education.gov.au/job-ready#:~:text=The%20Australian%20Government's%20Job%2Dready,students%2C%20industry%20and%20the%20community. Accessed 15 July 2024.

Berlin, I. (2002). *Liberty*. Ed. H. Hardy. Clarendon Press.

Boliver, V., & Promenzio, L. (2024). The hyper-commodification of higher education in England: A longitudinal and cross-nationally comparative analysis. *Paper to the Virtual Conference of the British Sociological Association, 3–5 April*. University of Durham Department of Sociology.

Brewis, E. (2024). Higher education and the public good in Finland. *Higher Education* [accepted].

Brewis, E., Brotherhood, T. & Yang, L. (2024). Higher education and the public good in Canada. *Higher Education* [accepted].

Brewis, E. & Marginson, S. (2024). Introduction to the special issue: 'The public good of higher education: A comparative study'. *Higher Education* [accepted].

Calhoun, C. (2006). The university and the public good. *Thesis Eleven,84*(1), 7–43. https://doi.org/10.1177/0725513606060516

Cantwell, B., Marginson, S., & Smolentseva, A. (2018). *High participation systems of higher education*. Oxford University Press.

Carpentier, V., & Courtois, A. (2024). Higher education and the public good in France. *Higher Education* [details TBA].

Chakrabarty, D. (2007). *Provincializing Europe: Post-colonial thought and historical difference* (2nd ed.). Princeton University Press.

Chan, J. (2014). *Confucian perfectionism: A political philosophy for modern times*.Princeton University Press.

Chapman, B., & Lounkaew, K. (2015). Measuring the value of externalities from higher education. *Higher Education,70*(5), 767–785.

CIA. (2024). *The world factbook*. https://www.cia.gov/the-world-factbook/field/languages/. Accessed 31 March 2024.

Dale, R. (2005). Globalisation, knowledge economy and comparative education. *Comparative Education*, *41*(2), 117–149. http://www.jstor.org/stable/30044528. Accessed 31 March 2024.

Dearing, R. (Chair of committee). (1997). *Higher education in the learning society: Main report*. http://www.educationengland.org.uk/documents/dearing1997/dearing1997.html. Accessed 24 Feb 2024.

de Sousa Santos, B. (2007). Beyond abyssal thinking: From global lines to ecologies of knowledges. *Review (Fernand Braudel Center), 30*(1), 45–89. https://www.jstor.org/stable/40241677. Accessed 30 Sep 2023.

Deneulin, S., & Townsend, N. (2007). Public goods, global public goods and the common good. *International Journal of Social Economics,34*(1–2), 19–36. https://doi.org/10.1108/03068290710723345

Dewey, J. (1927). *The public and its problems*. Originally published by H. Holt. Republished Ohio University Press.

Foucault, M. (2005). The hermeneutics of the subject: Lectures at the College de France 1981–82. G. Burchell (transl.). Picador.

Foucault, M. (2011). *The courage of truth: Lectures at the College de France 1983–84*. G. Burchell (transl.). Palgrave.

Foucault, M. (2020). *Ethics: Essential works 1954–1984*. Penguin Random House.

Foucault, M. (2021). Speaking the truth about oneself: Lectures at Victoria University, Toronto, 1982. In H. P. Fruchaud & D. Lorenzini (Eds.), *Speaking the Truth about Oneself*. University of Chicago Press.

Fraser, N. (1990). Rethinking the public sphere: A contribution to the critique of actually existing democracy. *Social Text,25*(26), 56–80. https://doi.org/10.2307/466240
Guzman-Valenzuela. (2024). Navigating public goods: Chilean public universities and their transformative role in Latin America. *Higher Education.* https://doi.org/10.1007/s10734-024-01298-8
Habermas, J. (1989). *The structural transformation of the public sphere*. The MIT Press.
Hardin, G. (1968). The tragedy of the commons. *Science*, *162*(3859), 1243–1248. https://www.jstor.org/stable/1724745. Accessed 31 March 2024.
Ignatieff, M. (2018). Academic freedom and the future of Europe. *CGHE Working Paper* 40, July. ESRC/HEFCE Centre for Global Higher Education. https://www.researchcghe.org/publications/working-paper/academic-freedom-and-the-future-of-europe/. Accessed 31 March 2024.
Kerr, C. (1963). *The uses of the university*. Harvard University Press.
Klein, N. (2020). How big tech plans to profit from the pandemic. *The Guardian*, 13 May. https://www.theguardian.com/news/2020/may/13/naomi-klein-how-big-tech-plans-to-profit-from-coronavirus-pandemic. Accessed 30 Jun 2024.
Locatelli, R. (2018). Education as a public and common good: Reframing the governance of education in a changing context. UNECSO *Education Research and Foresight Working Papers, 22*, February. http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0026/002616/261614E.pdf. Accessed 25 Sep 2023.
Lukes, S. (1973). *Individualism*. Basil Blackwell.
Lukes, S. (2021). *Power: A radical view* (3rd ed.). Bloomsbury.
Mansbridge, J. (1998). On the contested nature of the public good. In W. Powell & E. Clemens (Eds.), *Private action and the public good* (pp. 3–19). Yale University Press.
Marginson, S. (2018). Private/public in higher education: A synthesis of economic and political approaches. *Studies in Higher Education,43*(2), 337. https://doi.org/10.1080/03075079.2016.1168797
Marginson, S. (2022). Space and scale in higher education: The glonacal agency heuristic revisited. *Higher Education,84*(6), 1365–1395. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10734-022-00955-0
Marginson, S. (2024). Student self-formation: An emerging paradigm in higher education. *Studies in Higher Education,49*(4), 748–762. https://doi.org/10.1080/03075079.2023.2252826
Marginson, S., Cantwell, B., Platonova, D., & Smolentseva, A. (2023). Intrinsic and extrinsic outcomes of higher education. In S. Marginson, B. Cantwell, D. Platonova, & A. Smolentseva (Eds.), *Assessing the contributions of higher education: Knowledge for a disordered world* (pp. 12–37). Edward Elgar.
Marginson, S. (forthcoming). The changing dynamics of space and scale: The university between nationalism and globalism. In K. Brogger, H. Moscovitz & S. Robertson (Eds.), *World yearbook of education*. Edward Elgar [accepted].
Marginson, S., & Xu, X. (2023). Hegemony and inequality in global science: Problems of the center-periphery model. *Comparative Education Review,67*(1), 31–52. https://doi.org/10.1086/722760
Marginson, S., & Yang, L. (2024). Higher education and public good in England. *Higher Education* [details TBA].
Marginson, S., & Yang, L. (2022). Individual and collective outcomes of higher education: A comparison of Anglo-American and Chinese approaches. *Globalisation, Societies and Education,20*(1), 1–31. https://doi.org/10.1080/14767724.2021.1932436
Marx, K.. & Engels, F. (1848/2014). *The communist manifesto*. Penguin.
Mazzucato, M. (2023). Governing the economics of the common good: From correcting market failures to shaping collective goals. *Journal of Economic Policy Reform.* https://doi.org/10.1080/17487870.2023.2280969
McMahon, W. (2018). The total return to higher education: Is there underinvestment for economic growth and development? *The Quarterly Review of Economics and Finance,70*, 90–111. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.qref.2018.05.005
Monbiot, G. (2024). I have a cure for our ailing democracy: Ban all donors, British and foreign. Run politics on membership fees. The Guardian, 3 May. https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/article/2024/may/03/cure-democracy-ban-donors-british-foreign-politics-membership-fees. Accessed 31 Jul 2024.
Morrison, D. (2013). The common good. In M. Deslauriers & P. Destree (Eds.), *The Cambridge companion to Aristotle's Politics* (pp. 176–198). Cambridge University Press. https://doi.org/10.1017/CCO9780511791581.008
Moscovitz, H., & Sabzalieva, E. (2023). Conceptualising the new geopolitics of higher education. *Globalisation, Societies and Education,21*(2), 149–165. https://doi.org/10.1080/14767724.2023.2166465
Mun, O., & Min, Y. (2022). Global public good in Korea as jeong. In S. Marginson & X. Xu (Eds.), *Changing higher education in East Asia* (pp. 33–50). Bloomsbury.
NSB (National Science Board). (2024). *Science and engineering indicators*: *Publications output: U.S. trends and international comparisons.* https://ncses.nsf.gov/pubs/nsb202333/downloads. *Accessed 10 Jul 2024.*
OECD (Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development). (2023). *Education at a glance, 2023*. OECD.
OED (Oxford Engliah Dictionary). (1993). *Shorter Oxford dictionary*. Oxford University Press.

Office for National Statistics 2024. *Internet users, UK: 2020.* https://www.ons.gov.uk/businessindustryandtrade/itandinternetindustry/bulletins/internetusers/2020. Accessed 31 Jul 2024.
Olssen, M., & Peters, M. (2005). Neoliberalism, higher education and the knowledge economy: From the free market to knowledge capitalism. *Journal of Education Policy,20*(3), 313–345. https://doi.org/10.1080/02680930500108718
Ostrom, E. (1990). *Governing the commons: The evolution of institutions for collective action*. Cambridge University Press.
Ostrom, E. (2010). Beyond markets and states: Polycentric governance of complex economic systems. *American Economic Review,100*(3), 641–672. https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9781316423936
Pusser, B. (2011). Power and authority in the creation of a public sphere through higher education. In B. Pusser, K. Kemper, S. Marginson, & I. Ordorika (Eds.), *Universities and the public sphere: Knowledge creation and state building in the era of globalization* (pp. 27–46). Routledge.
Reich, R. (2022). America's billionaire class is funding anti-democratic forces. The Guardian, 23 May. https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2022/may/23/americas-billionaire-class-is-funding-anti-democratic-forces. Accessed 31 Jul 2024.
Runciman, D. (2018). *How democracy ends*. Profile Books.
Samuelson, P. (1954). The pure theory of public expenditure. *Review of Economics and Statistics,36*(4), 387–389.
Shattock, M., & Horvath, A. (2020). *The governance of British higher education: The impact of governmental, financial and market pressures*. Bloomsbury.
Smith, A. (1759/2002). *The theory of moral sentiments*. In K. Haakonssen, (Ed.). Cambridge University Press.
Smith, A. (1776/1937). An inquiry into the nature and causes of the wealth of nations. Ed. E. Cannan, Modern Library.
Statista. (2004). *Number of Internet users worldwide 2005–2023*. https://www.statista.com/statistics/273018/number-of-internet-users-worldwide/. Accessed 30 Aug 2024
Stein, S., Andreotti, V., Suša, R., Ahenakew, C., & Čajková, T. (2020). From 'education for sustainable development' to 'education for the end of the world as we know it.' *Educational Philosophy and Theory,54*(3), 274–287. https://doi.org/10.1080/00131857.2020.1835646
Svarverud, R. (2010). Individual self-discipline and collective freedom in the minds of Chinese intellectuals. In M. Hansen, & R. Svarverud (Ed.), *iChina: The rise of the individual in modern Chinese society* (pp. 193–225). NIAS Press.
Symonds, J., Sievers, B. & Smith, J. (2022). Toward an agenda for pursuit of the common good: An exploration. *Global Perspectives*, *3*(1). https://doi.org/10.1525/gp.2022.38554
Szadkowski, K. (2024). For the society as a whole: Higher education and the public good in Poland. *Higher Education*. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10734-024-01278-y
Taylor, C. (2004). *Modern social imaginaries*. Duke University Press.
Thatcher, M. (1987). Interview for *Woman's Own* ('no such thing as society'). In *Margaret Thatcher Foundation: Speeches, interviews and other statements*. https://www.margaretthatcher.org/speeches. Accessed 31 Jan 2024.
Tian, L., Feng, Z., & Liu, N. (2024). *Measuring global common goods in higher education: Dimensions and potential indicators*. Higher Education. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10734-024-01287-x
Tian, L., & Liu, N. (2024). Higher education and public good: The case of China. *Higher Education* [accepted].
Tian, L., & Liu, N. (2019). Rethinking higher education in China as a common good. *Higher Education,77*, 623–640. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10734-018-0295-5
Tomlinson, M. (2017). Student perceptions of themselves as 'consumers' of higher education. *British Journal of Sociology of Education,38*(4), 450–467. https://doi.org/10.1080/01425692.2015.1113856
(UN) United Nations. (2024). Universal declaration of human rights. https://www.un.org/en/about-us/universal-declaration-of-human-rights. Accessed 31 Aug 2024.
UNESCO (United Nations Educational, Social and Cultural Organization). (2024). UNESCO Institute for Statistics data on Education. http://data.uis.unesco.org/. Accessed 30 Sep 2024.
Vaccaro, I., Beltran, O., & Del Marmol, C. (2024). Reimagining modern politics in the European mountains: Confronting the traditional commons with the neo-rural conception of the common good. *Theory and Society,53*, 97–117. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11186-023-09528-1
Valimaa, J., & Muhonen, R. (2018). Reproducing social equality across the generations: The Nordic model of high participation higher education in Finland. In B. Cantwell, S. Marginson, & A. Smolentseva (Eds.), *High participation systems of higher education* (pp. 358–385). Oxford University Press.
Vygotsky, L. (1978). *Mind in society: The development of the higher psychological processes*. Harvard University Press.
Vygotsky, L. (1986). *Thought and language*. The MIT Press.
Weber, M. (1905/2002). *The protestant ethic and the 'spirit' of capitalism: And other writings*. In P. Baehr, & G. Wells (Eds.). Penguin.

Witte, J. (2023). Higher education, science and the climate crisis. In S. Marginson, B. Cantwell, D. Platonova, & A. Smolentseva (Eds.), *Assessing the contributions of higher education* (pp. 89–110). Edward Elgar.
Yan, Y. (2009). *The individualisation of Chinese society*. Berg.
Yang, L. & Chen, L. (2024). A lexical comparison of the public good of higher education: Concepts, contextual underpinnings, and implications, focusing on Japanese, Chinese and English. *Higher Education* [accepted].
Yang, L., Marginson, S., & Xu, X. (2024). Thinking through the world: A tianxia heuristic for higher education. *Globalisation, Societies and Education, 22*(2), 139–155. https://doi.org/10.1080/14767724.2022.2098696