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Making the world a better place? English higher education and global public good

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Abstract
UK higher education is highly internationalised. Two-thirds of science papers with UK authors involve international collaboration, one-quarter of higher education students are international, and their fees constitute more than a fifth of institutional income. What then are the contributions of higher education and research to the global public good? The study investigates this in relation to England within UK, drawing on interviews with 37 people who construct relational global space and carry out cross-border activities. Interviewees included leaders and faculty in three universities, policy makers/regulators, national higher education organisations, and academic experts on higher education. The findings are interpreted in terms of theorisations of global spatiality and global public good. The interviewees believed that English higher education made the world a better place, but this was clearer in research than in high-fee international education, where the imperative of revenue raising took priority with no provision for equity. Potentials for the shared global public good were limited by the often methodologically nationalist and Anglo-centric terms in which cross-border relations were understood. Many saw national good and global good as synonymous, suggesting they had not moved far from the Imperial mindset. Some referred to multiple perspectives on global public good, or mission tensions in international education, but none conceived the global public good separately from national interest.

Keywords Higher education · Public good · Global public good · Global common good · Higher education policy · International education · Research · England

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Introduction

Higher education institutions, systems, and persons, including their activities in research and scholarship, are engaged in multiple geographic *scales*. They are active globally, nationally, and locally (Marginson, 2022a). In parts of the world, higher education also connects on a regional basis, for example in Europe. Local activities and relations in higher education have several modalities, including institutions, discipline-based groups, and organisations such as faculty and student unions. The individual can be seen as another scale of action (Moscovitz & Sabzalieva, 2023). A feature of research-intensive universities is that often they are active in all these different geographic scales at the same time.

In terms of politics and policy, governance, and funding, higher education institutions across the world are embedded in *national* systems (Marginson, 2024a), and this powerfully shapes thought and practice. Since 1990, there has also been a quantitative and qualitative growth in activity in the *global scale* (Marginson, 2022b). The different agents in higher education, national systems, institutions, groups, and individuals engage in *global space making* in higher education. Despite disruptions of cross-border activity triggered by nativist politics and geo-political conflict (Moscovitz & Sabzalieva, 2023; Marginson, forthcoming), research-intensive universities are among the most globally engaged of all social organisations (global space, space making, and scale are all further discussed below).

What kind of outcomes is associated with global relations in higher education, and who benefits from those outcomes? In particular, are the benefits combined and mutual, or are they largely or entirely secured by particular institutions or national systems? Do global actions and relations in higher education contribute to the collective and mutual *global public good*?

The present article is part of a Special Issue of the journal on 'The public good of higher education: a comparative study', grounded in a 2015–2024 ESRC Centre for Global Higher Education research project (Brewis & Marginson, 2024). The project started from the assumption that the business model of higher education, advocated in neoliberal policy, reduces the actual and potential social value of the sector. In this research, we identify as 'public good' outcomes of higher education *other than* the pecuniary benefits for individuals (e.g. better salaries and employment opportunities) and for institutions (e.g. university revenues and prestige) at the centre of business model of higher education. These public good outcomes consist of (1) non-pecuniary benefits for individuals such as knowledge, enhanced agency, and lifelong learning and (2) higher education's many collective social, economic, political, and cultural contributions, including knowledge, technological literacy and innovation, public health, public connectedness, social tolerance, and international relations. Public good outcomes are generated in all of the local, national, regional, and global scales of action. This article is about *public good outcomes in the global scale.*

Specifically, the article investigates (a) the global engagement of universities in England in the United Kingdom (UK), as seen by practitioners of that global engagement; (b) the nature of that global engagement, including the outcomes it generates, and relations between the global activity of institutions and their local/national identities, missions, and activities; and (c) the extent to which the global activities of higher education institutions are seen in England as being of value not just to higher education in England, but to other parts of the world, thereby constituting collective and mutual *global public good*. Hence, the sub-title of this article refers to an interrogation: 'Making the world a better place?'. The overarching research question is as follows:

- RQ. What does higher education in England contribute to global public good in and through higher education, according to practitioners in England?

Data for the study consist of 37 semi-structured interviews in three English universities and with policy professionals, including current and former policy makers/regulators, leaders of national higher education organisations, and academic experts on the sector (interviewees are introduced below in Table 1). The research focused on the cross-border engagements of English institutions within England: offshore campuses and online provision were not directly investigated. The article proceeds as follows. It begins by positioning the contribution of the research in literatures on global higher education, public good, English higher education, and international education. Then, in place of a full-scale critical literature review in these four domains (that would exceed the boundaries of a journal article), it presents theorised concepts that will be used in interpreting the empirical data, in relation to space, space making, scale in higher education, public good, and global public good. The section that follows provides background on higher and international higher education in England. The next section introduces the empirical research, including the customised interview sample. This is succeeded by the summary of findings (there are fuller findings in the anonymised data file accessed at the end of the article). Discussion and conclusions follow.

Contributions of the research

The article sits at the junction of studies of global higher education and studies of higher education and public good. It also contributes to the research and policy-related literatures on UK higher education and research, and international higher education in the UK.

The global scale

Much scholarly work has been done on global space making and scale, in general and in higher education (e.g. Lefebvre, 1991; Marginson & Rhoades, 2002; Rizvi & Lingard, 2009; Murphy et al., 2010; King et al., 2011; Shahjahan & Kezar, 2013; Robertson, 2018; Marginson, 2022a; Marginson, 2022b). This article is informed especially by Massey (2005).

Public good in higher education

Literature on higher education and public good consists primarily of commentary and polemic, but Calhoun (2006), Nixon (2010), Pusser (2012), Marginson (2018), and others make scholarly contributions. The present article sits alongside others in this Special Issue on higher education and public good (Brewis & Marginson, 2024, Marginson (2024a) is a more extensive exploration of conceptual issues in relation to higher education and public good, common good, and global common good. Tian et al. (2024) consider metrics for measuring global common goods in higher education. Higher education and global public good are discussed in several country studies including Chile (Guzman-Valenzuela, 2024), Finland (Brewis, 2024), China (Tian & Liu, 2024), and Japan (Huang et al., 2024). These are brief discussions because of the constraints of space. Arguably, aside from science studies focused on cross-border research in particular nations, studies that do not explicitly

address public good issues, the present paper contributes the most extensive investigation of the global public good role of higher education in one country.

Public good in higher education in England

The Special Issue article on 'Higher education and public good in England' (Marginson & Yang, 2024) is the first empirical study of higher education and public good in England. It tracks the declining recognition of public good outcomes in English higher education policy making after 1997. The full-scale market reform in 2012 focused attention largely on individualised outcomes of higher education, expressed in commodity form, such as graduate earnings and employment rates, with limited social goals in the form of widening participation and research impact. Interviewees in the study asserted that higher education had a larger mission to fulfil public good, but they were unclear about what that meant. Marginson and Yang (2024) also refer to critical empirical studies in the UK on the marketisation of higher education, especially the paradigm of student-as-consumer. However, these studies are normatively grounded in social justice for domestic students, not international students.

The extensive UK-based literature on international education is largely focused on issues related to student recruitment, welfare, pedagogy, and cross-cultural mixing. It mostly adapts to the political economy of the high-fee market model, including the commercial goal of maximum student numbers and revenues. There is widespread commitment to a normative definition of 'internationalisation' in higher education (Knight, 2004), in which cross-border engagement of all kinds is readily represented as positive (Marginson, 2023). There is also some critical literature. Naidoo (e.g. 2011; 2018) tackles the political philosophy underlying international marketing in emerging countries, and Lomer, Mettelmeier, and colleagues show that UK policy and practice in international education are concerned with national interest without necessary regard for the global public good (e.g. Lomer (2017) on UK soft power in international education, and Lomer et al. (2018) on the 'promotion of a higher education brand for the UK'). Because the present article focuses on higher education and global public good in England, it finds itself positioned within this group of critical papers that interrogate the high-fee market in international education.

Why study England?

Why global public good in England, and what is the significance of the distinction between England and the UK? In mid-2022, England had 83.9% of the population of the UK. The UK is a conglomerate nation, the outcome of a thousand years of English colonisation of Wales, Scotland, and Ireland. In the twentieth century partial self-government ('devolution') was achieved, and there are now four higher education systems with differing policies.[1] For example, in Scotland, domestic students pay no fees, though in England, international students pay fees. However, the central UK government in England continues to exercise budgetary control. In the present study, all interviewees except one in Wales were

[1] The legislative frameworks for devolution were originally set out in the Scotland Act 1998, the Government of Wales Act 1998, and the Northern Ireland Act 1998, although all three have subsequently been amended.

in England, and when they talked of the 'UK', they were usually discussing the English system. We also use 'Britain' to invoke the England-dominated four nations.

UK and especially English higher education is characterised by cross-border connections that are extensive and intensive on the world scale, in student mobility (UNESCO, 2024), university partnerships, research networks, and high citation science (NSB, 2024). This global role rests on accumulated academic resources, organisational capabilities, and university prestige, mutually reproductive factors that are legacies of Imperialism. Great Britain was globally hegemonic in the nineteenth century and a leading world power until about 1950. While it no longer exercises military, economic, and political dominance, its universities still command world attention. This inherited centrality was partly but not wholly disrupted by the UK's exit from the European Union in 2016 (Highman et al., 2023). Given this global centrality, the extents to which English universities further the welfare of other countries, and the world, and on whose terms, are matters of broad interest.

In this study, we wanted to see whether, in the eyes of higher education insiders, the globally powerful English universities really did meet common global challenges, solve shared global problems, and 'make the world a better place', as many claimed in their marketing. What did these universities understand as shared problems and making the world a better place? How did they fulfil such ambitions? How did their active commitment to global public good square with their other goals? Did they work for the world only to the extent that their own needs were met, or did they make primary a larger global good?

The study also has the potential to contribute to investigations of global relations of power in higher education. At the time of the interviews, the global space in higher education and science was changing rapidly (Marginson, forthcoming). The rise of China, South Korea, Singapore, India, Indonesia, Brazil, and other non-Western systems meant that a more multi-polar environment was emerging. How was this perceived by interviewees in a globally strong Euro-American country, whose historic hegemony is on a downward trajectory? Would the interviewees in England be aware of global multi-polarity? Would they believe that the global public good lay in maintaining an Anglophone-dominated order in higher education and research, or in countries learning from others in a more diverse setting?

Global space and public good

The section that follows reviews concepts of space, space making and scale in higher education, public good and goods, and global public good and briefly mentions the related concept of global common good. In the Centre for Global Higher Education research project on the public good role of higher education, we have concluded that 'common good' is more useful for theorisation and research in higher education than is 'public good', particularly in describing collective outcomes (see Marginson, 2024a). However, 'common good' is not part of the research findings reported here. Interviewees in England were not familiar with the term.

Global space and space making

Universities, nations, knowledge, and the world are always becoming. Reality is never fixed or finished and has immanent multiplicity. Notwithstanding the homogenising tendencies

triggered by powerful agents and normalising processes, structures of power likewise evolve and differentiate over time. In short, global higher education turns on 'the co-existence of difference' (Massey, 2003, p. 3). There is a continuing oscillation between sameness and difference (Pieterse, 2020, p. 235) in which ever-emerging diversity has the final word.

For Massey (2005), the lives of people are trajectories moving through time, and these trajectories intersect, accidentally and deliberately, individually and collectively, in *space*. 'If time unfolds as change then space unfolds as interaction' (p. 61). The concept of space in human geography is that of *social space*. This differs from space in physics. Massey's space is not a pre-existing container waiting to be filled. It is the sphere of social relations, including relations of power, and is continually constructed by human agents (Marginson, 2022a; Wong, 2023). That does not mean that social space is solely imaginary, without materiality. Space making *combines* (a) pre-given historical-material elements (structures) such as geographical territories and localities, and resources, institutions, and networks, with (b) the imaginings and interpretations of space-making agents, and (c) the social practices whereby they bring their visions into material form. For example, creating a global network of universities means joining real institutions in grounded locations. The coordinates are material, but the process of joining them together is social and entails the imagination.

The construction of geo-social space is an ongoing process that is never finished. Agents use varying strategies to control space and its uses, via selective opening, partitioning, and closing. In spaces that are far reaching and inclusive, as in global relations in higher education and knowledge, not even the strongest agents can maintain control forever. Every geo-social space 'escapes in part from those who make use of it' (Lefebvre, 1991, p. 26).

Geographical scales

The geographical scales are also constructed spaces in this sense. The global, national, regional, and local scales are meta-spaces that have been brought into being by the accumulated imagining and practical work of many persons, institutions and corporations, groups and networks, nation-states, and pan-national organisations. Scales are defined by widespread recognition of the shared relational space. Anderson (2006) described nations as 'imagined communities'. He emphasises that nations are not natural or inevitable, but sustained by ceaseless work. The same is true of the global scale, except that in large part, it is more recent than nation-states. The constructed nature of global space was apparent in global evolution after 1990, when the end of the first Cold War coincided with the start of the Internet. The next two decades saw explosive growth in networked communications and global economic markets. In higher education, cross-border and trans-border activities constituted a largely new global space with diverse, shared, and contradictory agendas. Researchers, universities, nations, and publishers formed an expanding global science system; grew a commercial market in cross-border education; ordered the sector on the basis of global rankings; and fashioned offshore campuses, online programmes, and world-spanning university consortia (Marginson, 2011). Globalisation in political economy and culture is more contested than it was, but universities and knowledge are still being shaped in ongoing global space making.

The multi-scalar character of higher education, and research and knowledge, is not always understood. The nation-state framework so dominates thinking about higher education that many find it hard to clearly see any other scale. In national policy, the default lens

is 'methodological nationalism' (Shahjahan & Kezar, 2013; Wimmer & Schiller, 2003), whereby the nation-state is seen to pattern all of society, the economy, and politics, so that global action must be an outgrowth of national action. Yet the global scale exists in its own right a methodological nationalist perspective blocks from clear view the phenomena located in the global scale (e.g. global ecology, global scientific networks). Methodological nationalism is not the same as normative nationalism, in which one nation is preferred above others (Beck, 2007). It is possible to be a multi-scalar patriot who keeps the global scale in full view.

This study is concerned with what English higher education agents imagined as the global space, and the potentials for global public good in that space. The interviewees were themselves global space makers, given the UK's multiple roles in global research and commercial international education. Global higher education was not just done to them, it was something they did themselves, albeit under conditions they did not fully control.

Global public good

Outcomes in higher education can be understood as individualised, collective, or both (individual/collective). *Individual outcomes* include pecuniary benefits received by single persons, such as an augmented salary resulting from graduation, and also non-pecuniary benefits such as personal knowledge of biology, or augmented agency and confidence. *Collective outcomes* include shared social benefits such as the contribution of COVID-19 vaccine research to national and global public health. *Individual/collective outcomes* include effects for individual students and graduates that also flow directly into collective social relations, such as the formation of graduates as politically capable and connected citizens. Many of the non-pecuniary outcomes for individuals have collective flow-ons, as do most kinds of vocational training. For example, the education of doctors and nurses generates salary returns for those health professionals and also expands public health capacity.

In the broadest definition of public good in higher education, all of the positive outcomes for individuals and collective society, whether pecuniary or non-pecuniary, are seen as part of the combined public good. However, the Anglophone term 'public good' is normally used more narrowly than this. It also has multiple and contradictory meanings.

Anglophone ideas of 'public'

When applied to global relations in higher education, Anglophone 'public' and 'public good', the starting point for the cross-country research in this Special Issue, have limits. Global relations bring all national-cultural traditions into play, and the Anglophone traditions are only one possible take on the collective and the global. No specific national-cultural tradition encompasses all of the insights in every other tradition.

Anglophone discourses of 'public' and public/private relations are grounded in Euro-American practices of divided powers in governance and the core assumption that in capitalist society, economic freedom is primary to and determining of other freedoms. There are four distinct meanings of 'public' in Anglophone discourse with resonances in higher education (Marginson & Yang, 2022): (1) state or government, as in 'public sector'; (2) 'the public good' as a condition of universal welfare, well-being, or beneficence; (3) an inclusive communicative citizenry, as in 'public opinion'; and (4) 'public goods' as part of a dualism with private goods, as in economics. In Anglophone economic policy, production takes the form of private goods produced in markets, except where there is a market

failure because the goods are non-rivalrous and/or non-excludable. In cases of market failure, the goods are public goods financed by the state or philanthropy (Samuelson, 1954). This formula residualises state responsibility and minimises state funding (Marginson, 2024a).

In this article, the starting point for understanding the public good in higher education is a mix of meanings 1, 2, and 3. The interviewees mostly understood public good via meanings 1 and 2. Concept 4, the economic dualism, was supported by a few interviewees and has been excluded from our own framework of interpretation because it normatively positions private goods against public good, unduly narrowing the potential for public good(s) 1–3.

Perspectives on global good

Transferring notions of public good from the national scale to the global scale is problematic because of multiple perspectives in the global scale. Answers to the question 'what i*s* the global public good in higher education?' vary by the lenses used to view higher education, such as those of country and culture (Marginson & Yang, 2022), and other ways of seeing, such as academic discipline, or material interest. Hence, when imagining and practising collective global outcomes, relations of power are in play. Some countries, institutions, and persons are better placed than others to advance their own construction of global public good, with consequences for all the other agents.

In the multiple global higher education setting, is it possible to define and achieve a mutually satisfactory understanding of global public good? Arguably, some aspects of the global are held in common widely or by all, subsuming national or commercial interest, such as sustainable global ecology. UNESCO's (2015) global common good is one broad definition of shared global good, though it is easier to secure agreement about general principles than the details of implementation. However, the problem is not only how to reach agreement, it is also how to make positive use of the worldwide diversity of understanding and insight. Amartya Sen (2002) proposes a 'transpositional method', which overcomes the limits of a single lens by integrating the perspectives of more than one viewpoint. The Chinese term *tianxia weigong* (Yang & Chen, 2024) values the broad distribution of agency, while drawing diverse agents together on the basis of shared norms and rituals. All the same, even these modes of managing multiplicity are touched by their culturally nested origins and limits.

In the global scale, the prevailing conditions and the mix of diverse agents, imaginings, and practices determine the potential for shared public goods. Massey (2005) shows that global relations of collective good must be constructed, like all forms of space making. The scope for collectivity varies by social sector. Global relations in higher education are distinct from global relations in economic markets, multilateral and bilateral diplomacy, national security, and war. Higher education connects across borders via its core functions in student learning and credentialling, research, and knowledge. These are naturally relational, collaborative activities which normalise joint production and win–win outcomes, contrasting with the zero-sum logic of realist national security and geo-politics. In higher education, there is a larger potential for collective public good than in economic transactions or the inter-state system. When cross-border higher education is profit-driven, as in England, there are potential tensions between collective public goods and individualised goods (Marginson, 2018), as becomes apparent in the interviews in the present study (see below).

UNDP global public good

Global public goods in higher education and other sectors are under-discussed in economic and social theory and policy. In the late 1990s, the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) attempted to shape a space of global public goods with a primarily ecological emphasis. Extending Samuelson (1954) to the global scale, Kaul et al. (1999) define global public goods as non-rivalrous, non-excludable, and 'quasi-universal', in that the benefits flow to plural countries, are broadly distributed within them, and affect the future as well as present populations (2–3). They also note that as well as global public goods, states and other agents can generate public bads, such as ecological pollution that flows across borders. Kaul et al. (1999) note three practical limitations to global public goods: the discrepancy between the global scale and separated national policies; the monopolisation of international cooperation by states and the marginalisation of non-state agents; and weak incentives for cooperation between states. Their monograph on global public goods includes a chapter by Stiglitz (1999) on knowledge as a global public good.

While in most countries universities are significantly embedded in states, these institutions can also construct their own cross-border relations. Hence, they are not always blocked by the three factors identified by Kaul and colleagues. Beyond the national border, the relations between universities, and between researchers, take the form of global civil society, with type (3) 'public' as inclusive community rather than type (1) public as state.

Global common good

Mazzucato (2023) finds the UNDP idea of global public goods to be unduly limiting, confined by Samuelson nonrivalry and nonexcludability without a global state to provide externalities. She advocates a common good approach that rests on collaboration at local, national, and global levels involving all of activist states, and corporate and non-profit actors. UNESCO (2015) has developed the idea of education as a global common good, conceived in terms of local bottom-up democratic production by public and private agents. The common good approach is further discussed in Marginson (2024a).

Higher and international education in England

The next section provides a brief background on cross-border higher education in England in the UK, the site of the empirical research in this article, noting the exceptional level of dependence on revenues derived from incoming fee-paying international students.

In 2022, the UK's 67.0 million people had a per capita income of USD $57,461, which was 2.74 times the world average (World Bank, 2024) though well below the levels in France, Germany, the Netherlands, Australia, Canada, the USA, Switzerland, and Nordic Europe. The 2.937 million students in 2022–2023 were enrolled in 285 registered institutions (Universities UK, 2024), with 2.423 million in England. UK higher education institutions received a total of £51.582 billion in income in 2022–2023, £44.038 billion in England (HESA, 2024).

Despite lesser national income than the other Anglophone countries and much of Western Europe, UK higher education (and within it English higher education) has enjoyed favourable conditions for global space making, especially through public goods in research.

The UK is intensively networked. In 2022, it was third in the output of high citation science, after the USA and China, and 66.6% of all papers with UK authors had international co-authors compared to the world average of 22.6% (NSB, 2024). The historic authority of UK/British universities; the cultural hegemony of English as the global language of business, technology, and education; and desires for 'global Whiteness' as a mode of individual investment in the future (Shahjahan & Edwards, 2022) also render British universities as powerful attractors of international students. However, the extent to which British higher education generates collective global public good is less clear.

As noted, English policy and system design emphasises the pecuniary benefits of higher education for domestic students, who in 2024–2025 paid a standard fee for first degrees of £9250 per full-time student, significantly higher than is paid by public in-state students in the USA. The same tuition framework - the individual as the sole financier - has been transferred across to the international education regime in the UK where fees are much higher on the world scale (OECD, 2023). All UK universities determine their own international student fees and student numbers, subject to visa policy, and this incentivises them to maximise revenues and market share at the highest feasible price. In 2022, international students in the UK paid £9000–38,000 a year depending on the institution, programme, and year level, averaging £22,000 for first degrees (British Council, 2024). The UK has long enrolled the world's second-largest number of onshore international students after the USA, except in 2019 when it was briefly passed by Australia. International student fees subsidise domestic education, buildings, and facilities. Remarkably, UK research, widely agreed by economists regardless of their policy persuasions to be a public good, is partly funded by the global student market, taking marketisation further than in Samuelson (1954).

Figure 1 demonstrates the trajectory of financial dependence on international student revenues, primarily from onshore students in the UK. The domestic student fee lost 22% of its real value between 2017 and 2024, accelerating the trend of that dependence. In 2022–2023, there were 553,590 non-EU fee international paying students in England, 22.8% of all students, and in the same year, non-EU student fees provided £9.294 billion,

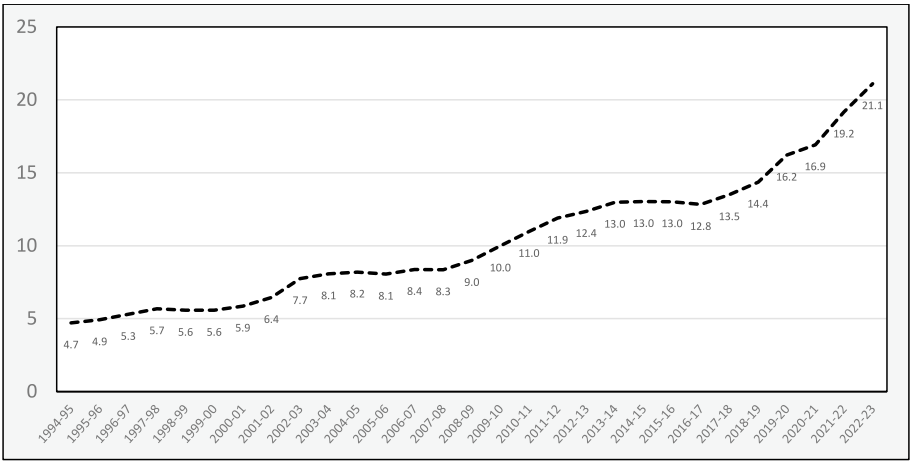

Fig. 1 Proportion (%) of income of higher education institutions in England derived from non-EU international student fees, 1994–1995 to 2022–2023. Source: authors, based on data from HESA (2024)

21.1% of institutional income in England (HESA, 2024). Prior to the UK's departure from the European Union, non-UK EU students paid the same fees as UK domestic students, but from 2021-2022 onwards, starting EU citizen students were paying full commercial fees.

In 2016–2017, non-EU international student income was 0.39 of income from domestic student fees, but by 2022–2023, the ratio was 0.74. Yet as Fig. 2 shows, the ratio in terms of student numbers in 2022–2023 was 0.31 (HESA, 2024). The financial tail was wagging the dog.

In England, the Office for Students nominally represents the student-as-consumer and uses domestic graduate salaries and student-as-consumer surveys as performance measures of institutions and disciplines, proxies for the individualised pecuniary value of degrees. In its political economy, policy goals, and regulatory structure, English higher education is now the most marketised of all higher education systems, an outlier even among liberal market Anglophone countries (Promenzio & Boliver, 2024). International education in English campuses is associated with multiple goals and diverse discourses, including the educational benefits of cross-cultural learning, national soft power, and the potential of international graduates as high-skill migrants. Yet the global business casts a shadow over all else.

Despite this, English universities are still expected to offer a rounded education, care for their charges, create knowledge, serve society, and do good in the world. The university leaders, faculty, and policy professionals interviewed by Marginson and Yang (2024) saw universities as a source of multiple public goods. The intrinsically cooperative character of cross-border higher education sits uneasily with England's neoliberal political economy. Westminster policy and commercial university rankings shape global higher education as a world market, but university personnel also have other cross-border relations in mind. This raises questions about which goals, practices, and ways of seeing have the most weight.

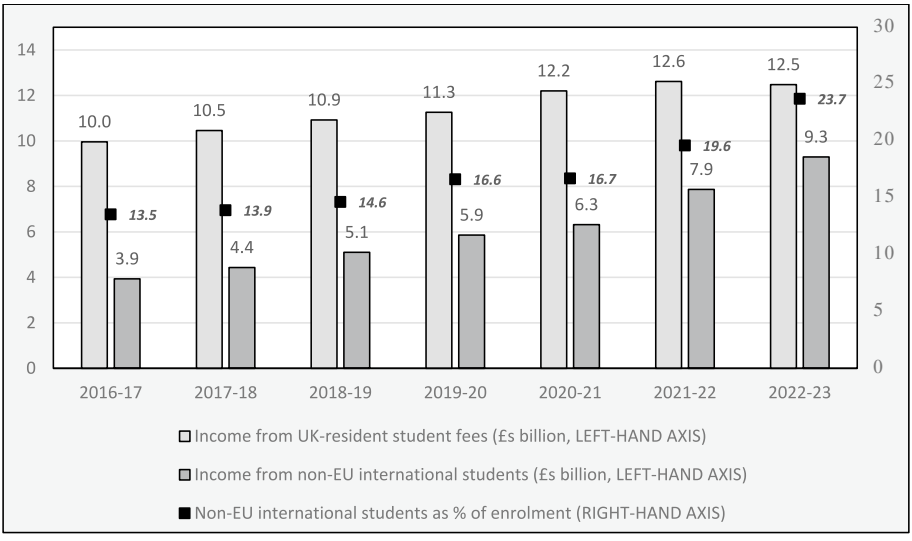

Fig. 2 Income from non-EU international students compared to UK-resident student fees (£s. billion, left-hand axis), and proportion of enrolled students that were non-EU international, higher education (%, right-hand axis), England, 2016–2017 to 2022–2023 (£s billion). Source: authors, based on data from HESA (2024)

The empirical research

This paper draws on four groups of interviews in England between 2017 and 2021. Interviews U-1 to U-13, focused on UK higher education and public good, were conducted face to face in 2017 in two research-intensive institutions: university 1 in London (U-1 to U-6), and Northern regional university 2 (U-7 to U-13). Interviews U-14 to U-26, focused on inward international student mobility in the UK as a public good, took place face to face in 2019 in Midlands regional university 3. The COVID-19 pandemic slowed data collection, and policy professionals P-1 to P-11, including policy makers and regulators currently or previously in government, leaders of national higher education organisations, and professors expert in higher education policy, were not interviewed online until 2021. These interviews like those of U-1 to U-13 were focused on UK higher education and public good.

Whereas the broad system settings were the same across the whole four-year period, dependence on international student revenues was increasing. In 2019, interviewees were especially conscious of the effects of Brexit in weakening ties within Europe. By 2021, the loss of EU ties had become normalised and was scarcely discussed.

Table 1 lists the 37 interviewees. This article covers only those parts of the interviews that are relevant to global public good. Interviewees U-1 to U-13 and P1–P11 were asked to conceptualise and discuss higher education and public good primarily in relation to the national scale (see Marginson & Yang, 2024). They were then asked the following question:

- How does higher education contribute to the global public good or goods?[2]

Interviewees U-14 to U-26 from university 3 were not asked to conceptualise public good in higher education, but one question referred directly to global public good:

- What are the main global public goods, benefits flowing not just to your country but to other countries, including the countries of student origin, that are created or augmented by inward student mobility in your nation?

Another question focused on cross-border equity, a matter of shared global good:

- In your opinion, what are the implications of inward student flows into the nation, and their national regulation, for (1) social equity in other countries and (2) global equity?

The findings reported here also take in other parts of the interviews where terms like 'global', 'goods', and 'public' were discussed and where interviewees reflected on global imaginings; spatialities; relations between global, national, and local activity; issues of power and equity in global education; and British higher education's position and positioning.

[2] Interviewees U1-U13 and P1–P11 were also asked 'How does higher education contribute to the global common good or goods', but almost none understood the meaning of 'common good' and those data are not discussed here.

Table 1 Interviews concerning global public good in higher education in England, 2017–2021

Interview number	Type	Position	Gender	Discipline of origin
U-1	University I	Mid-level manager-leader	Male	Literature
U-2	University I	Senior-level manager-leader	Female	Arts
U-3	University I	Senior-level manager-leader	Male	Medicine
U-4	University I	Faculty member (professor)	Male	Political economy
U-5	University I	Mid-level manager-leader	Female	Public policy
U-6	University I	Mid-level manager-leader	Male	Computer science
U-7	University II	Senior-level manager-leader	Female	English literature and drama
U-8	University II	Mid-level manager-leader	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
U-14	University III	Senior-level manager-leader	Male	Medicine
U-15	University III	Senior-level manager-leader	Female	Art history
U-16	University III	Senior-level manager-leader	Male	Politics
U-17	University III	Mid-level manager-leader	Male	Language
U-18	University III	Faculty member (associate professor)	Male	Language
U-19	University III	Mid-level manager-leader	Male	Management
U-20	University III	Mid-level manager-leader	Female	Education
U-21	University III	International PhD student	Male	Chemistry
U-22	University III	Senior-level manager-leader	Male	Management
U-23	University III	International PhD student	Male	Engineering
U-24	University III	Faculty member (professor)	Male	Chemistry
U-25	University III	Faculty member (professor)	Female	Politics

Table 1 (continued)

Interview number	Type	Position	Gender	Discipline of origin
U-26	University III	International undergraduate student	Female	Language
P-1	Government agency	Policy maker and regulator	Male	
P-2	Government agency	Policy maker and regulator	Male	
P-3	National organisation	Previous policy maker	Male	
P-4	National organisation	Previous policy maker and current leader of organisation	Male	
P-5	National organisation	Leader of organisation	Male	
P-6	National organisation	Leader of organisation	Female	
P-7	National organisation	Leader of organisation	Female	
P-8	University	Expert on higher education and policy	Male	Economic geography
P-9	University	Expert on higher education and policy	Male	Higher education
P-10	University	Expert on higher education and policy	Male	Economics and education
P-11	University	Expert on higher education and policy	Female	Economics and education

Source: ESRC Centre for Global Higher Education semi-structured research project interviews by Aline Courtois in 2017, Simon Marginson in 2017 and 2021, Thomas Brotherhood in 2019, and Lili Yang in 2021

Findings from the interviews

As noted, there is a fuller record of the findings in the online supplement accessed within this article. The text of the article provides highlights from those findings.

Constructing relations in global space

For the most part, the interviewees, especially in the three universities, were professionally committed to cross-border activity and accustomed to talking up global engagement at home and abroad. They readily slipped into a normative internationalisation in which all cross-border activity was presented in abstract-universal terms as inherently virtuous (Marginson, 2023), consistent also with the type (2) normative meaning of 'public good' as a condition of universal benefit. This was especially apparent in the recurring win–win talk about inward student mobility at university 3 (e.g. U-17, U-18, U-20, U-21, U-22, U-24, and U-25):

> This university is very proud of its international identity, and that's on all of its publicity, all of its marketing. It's forged relationships, difficult relationships in countries where it is not easy… In this respect universities have been a force for good.
> U-17, university 3, mid level leader-manager, languages
> Mobility programmes have a positively transformational impact on many, if not all, of our students.
> U-18, university 3, faculty member, language

Some faculty at university 3 qualified the win–win picture, noting that there was an unsatisfactory level of cross-cultural mixing among students (e.g. U-15, U-17). That was emphasised by all three international students in the study (U-21, U-23, U-26). There were also occasional qualms about brain drain from the global South and the ethics of commercial education (discussed below); but overall, global public bads received limited attention.

What kind of global space?

Interviewees constructed the global space in terms of both cooperation and mutual interest, and competition and self-interest. The latter was more sharply stated, especially in university 3. In the most common line of reasoning, type (2) normative internationalisation, presented in the form of a universal public good, legitimated the pursuit of all global agendas including university business activity. Nevertheless, two interviewees emphasised that the global space was not inherently 'public' in the sense of cooperative or non-market. It was normed by international competition (P-2) and university rankings (P-8). Others identified a plural global space. It was both a common public good and a way to secure a comparative advantage for universities and career advantages for people, especially international students who invested in British education (e.g. U-15; U-17; U-20, U-22).

When the interview questions focused explicitly on global public good, that pushed the discussion of the global space more towards cooperation. While the type (1) meaning of 'public' was unavailable for discussing global public good, as there is no global state, more than a third of interviewees discussed worldwide higher education in terms of the type (3) meaning of 'public', imagining global higher education as a single relational community. The terms 'global society' (P-9) or 'global community' (P-6 used both) and notions of

cosmopolitanism (e.g. U-18) were drawn together with global engagement, connectedness, and commonality. Some invoked the shared global community imaginary in vague idealistic terms while being more hard-headed in other answers. One professor of chemistry at university 3 (U-24) developed an expanded theory of cross-border community. Higher education was a 'joined up sector' via communication networks in global civil society. While a university's first responsibility was to its students and 'to an extent the local community', many local problems were shared with others (see also P-10), so universities had a 'wider global responsibility' to work with universities everywhere. Also, they were more effective in influencing states when they presented as a sector, not individual institutions.

Relations between scales

Interviewees grappled with reconciling higher education missions and activities in all of the global, national, and local scales. Some university leaders, especially those from health sciences, saw global/national/local synergies as a key to institutional strategy (U-2, U-12, U-16). For example, local medical research could generate global health benefits. Brexit suggested local resentment about global missions, and this had to be addressed (U-15, U-20), but when asked about scalar tensions, most interviewees fell back on normative assertions, harmonising the scalar missions in general terms, as in the claims about the contributions of international students to city and community that were aired by multiple interviewees at university 3 (e.g. U-15, U-17, U-21, U-22, U-24, U-25).

In contrast, some interviewees were such strong normative internationalists that they eschewed harmony between the different geographical scales. What mattered was 'keeping the university at the forefront of UK higher education in terms of global footprint' (U-22; also U-3, U-6, U-16, U-18, U-25). At universities 2 and 3, several people foregrounded university contributions to the region, in research and the arts (U-8, U-12, U-13).

Fourteen university interviewees (U-5, U-6, U-10, U-13, U-14, U-15, U-16, U-17, U-18, U-19, U-20, U-22, U-24, U-25) explicitly stated that national policy and regulation did not conflict with global public goods. Yet, there was little discussion of positive global/national synergies, except universities' contributions to national soft power (U-15, U-17, P-2), and more evidence of global/national dissonance. Eight interviewees criticised the regulation of student visas (U-1, U-14, U-15, U-18, U-19, U-20, U-22, U-25). It was said that the national government was concerned with national public goods, not global public goods (U-6, U-12).

The policy professionals took a more nuanced approach to global/national/local relations. Half of them stated that the extent of engagement in global public goods, and the balance of activity between scales, should vary within the sector (P-1, P-4, P-5, P-6, P-7).

> It would be slightly more honest, and probably lead to better outcomes, if some universities said 'we're only a local institution', or 'we're a local and national institution but we're not very good at the international stuff' … But it's very very difficult for university managers or university governors to do [given how universities] are judged and assessed.
> P-4, leader, national organisation

In the absence of public planning, there was no mechanism for orchestrating a division of labour on the basis of institutional mission. In a system framed as a national market, all institutions needed nominally equivalent status to maximise their starting position and range of opportunities. People from all three universities placed no limits on their own

institution's global mission, though several at the London global university 1 suggested that at universities other than their own, the mission might be more local and less global.

Concepts of global public good

Though all interviewees saw the 'global' as an important dimension of university activity, there were limited reflections on 'global public good'. When the term arose explicitly, many asked for an elaboration before answering. Almost half (16/37) explained the global public good as the good of the-world-as-a-whole (U-1 to U-5, U-7, U-9, U-12, U-13, P-1 to P-5, P-7, P-9). A recurring theme was that universities were for 'making the world a better place'. Most exhibited an easy confidence that universities did so in the natural course of events.

> It is about … making the world a better place, and I think that is the mission of … universities in general.
> U-13, university 2, professor, history

Thereafter, the world-as-a-whole was not referenced. But interviewees were mostly confident that they created benefits that were universal. Research, especially, lent itself to ready assertions of global public good (U-7, U-22, P-5, P-10). New knowledge was seen as a shared public good with borderless potentials, especially in 'sciences and engineering', which were naturally 'international' (U-6). Here, interviewees moved between different constructions of relational global space: the local creation of knowledge sent across borders with global impact (e.g. U-5, U-24), combining with other worldwide experts in 'collaborative teams', cross-border relations among equals (U-14), and the UK donating research training and knowledge to countries with lesser capacity (U-24).

Singular or multiple perspectives on global public good?

Half of the 16 interviewees who saw the global public good as good-of-the-world-as-a-whole couched that in the form of a singular universal understanding of global public good. This begged the questions 'from whose viewpoint?' and 'in whose interest?'. The singular understanding normally boiled down to an unreflective notion of global public good as Britain writ large.

In contrast with these ideas of the international/global as singular and universal—and the lack of reflexivity about *whose* perspective on global public good was universal—eight of the 37 interviewees knew that relations in the global space were multiple in character, and that there was more than one possible take on the global public good. U-2 saw it as 'hubristic' to define the global public good from Britain. Policy professional P-7 argued that different countries had varied capacities to benefit from global relations: they could not share a single global good:

> The extension of knowledge is broadly good for everyone, but it is never going to be that simple, because who has access to that knowledge, who is able to mobilise that knowledge, who has the resources, is always going to be part of the picture.
> P-7, leader, national organisation

At university 3, U-18 criticised 'the default way of thinking in the UK' that saw Britain as 'the majority', meaning the global norm, with non-British nations exhibiting 'identities

and cultures and behaviours that deviate from the norm'. For U-18, 'there isn't really a norm …there has to be a plural model … other people do things differently'. P-2 agreed:

> We sometimes think of other countries through our own Western lenses… our characterisation, particularly of Asian universities, represents the West's view of Asia, and that conditions all your discussions, rather than their own views, where they consider things as goods that you don't… It's interesting to look at what differentiates both economies and societies, and what's common, and then work out the role of higher education in both of those things
> P-2, policy maker and regulator

P-4 expressed a similar view. P-1 noted that there could be global agreement on the need to tackle climate change, global poverty, and inequality but there was no 'unified global view' on questions like human rights and tolerance. However, universities and scientists might have greater scope for developing cross-border agreement than do states.

Methodological nationalism and UK-centrism

Notwithstanding the explicit criticism of methodological nationalism by U-2, U-18, and P-2, many interviewees saw the global space as a projection of the national space, and they viewed that global space from a position of UK-centrism and in nation-bound terms. While British patriotism was rarely referenced, interviewees seemed to swim in it as a normal operating condition. Only five in the sample of 37, including the three international students at university 3, questioned the global superiority of British education and research. Many interviewees made an explicit claim to that superiority. Methodological nationalism and normative nationalism reinforced each other.

National public good is global public good

Global public goods were often presented as beneficial outcomes for other countries that were created by moving beyond the national border (e.g. U-9), rather than being created interactively between agents in a shared space. This resembled the UNDP idea of global public goods as nationally-generated cross-border externalities (Kaul et al. 1999; arguably, that UNDP notion also fails to conceive the global space as sufficiently relational). In research, higher education as a global public good meant 'bringing your knowledge, your experience, to improve something in another country' and 'across the world'. In education, it meant 'developing the skills, the knowledge, the thinking' which would help other societies to progress, through vocational training, and 'cultural understanding, an awareness of curiosity, of team working, of leadership' (P-5, also U-25).

In this imaginary, British universities were a font of knowledge for the world, a donor with a superior culture and education to offer to 'developing countries'. Positioning their own universities at the centre, interviewees saw them as drawing the world's attention while at the same time making that same world a better place through fee-based international education, advice and consultancy, research collaboration, and trickle-down effects from published science. The UK made global public good by just being itself, a hubristic claim that was stated bluntly by U-1 and U-6 at university 1:

> We create better citizens in the UK. That contributes to the national public good, and the global public good.
> U-6, university 1, mid level leader-manager, computer science

U-1's discussion of 'global citizens' carried the implicit belief that British higher education, on its own, generated universal citizens. With this mindset, the givers of global public goods did not need to leave British shores. 'We see it as the world's role to come and work with us here and we shouldn't have the inconvenience of going out', as a university leader wryly put it (U-14). It was striking how some of the interviewees moved spatially in a fluent fashion between the perspective of looking outwards from the English centre and the perspective of seeing the world as a whole, from above. They felt free to operate anywhere on earth, customising one-to-one cross-border relations as they saw fit.

Britain's global role was talked about in the same manner as the win–win discourse about internationalisation. UK universities were good citizens in the face of common global challenges (e.g. U-14, U-24, P-6, P-10), when alleviating global inequality (e.g. U-3, U-22, P-5, P-6, P-8, P-10), or filling gaps in other societies and economies (e.g. U-22 on training pharmacy students from Kuwait). A leader at university 3 said that 'the quality of what we do' also contributed to global public good. 'If they do go back to their country of origin, hopefully they can use those principles to increase quality, locally' (U-14). Several interviewees shared P-6's point that UK training in critical thinking was renovating societies and polities elsewhere. Working with such assumptions, the unabashed pursuit of English self-interest, such as the maximum recruitment of international students at the highest possible price, was readily rationalised as contributions to the universal global good.

The discourse about the outward gifting of public goods via education and research blended into formal foreign aid programmes (e.g. U-14). For U-16, the contribution of the university to global public goods could be measured in terms of transactional self-interest by the volume of foreign aid funding obtained by the university. Some interviewees joined the gifting of global public goods to national soft power via higher education and research (U-15, P-2) though as U-17 cautioned, not every mobile student was won over by soft power. One international doctoral student politely argued that some university programmes were insular and needed more 'international components' (U-23). Among the 'internationalist' faculty and administrators at the same university 3, just one had the same thought.

The self-satisfaction and normative UK-centrism were almost relentless, part of the conversation even of interviewees who acknowledged global multiplicity and were not methodologically nationalist. They still saw British universities as embodying a superior culture, as in critical thinking or reflexive democracy (U-25); or they frankly gave priority in global relations to national interests (e.g. P-7). The potential for a global good separate from national good, or one that partly subsumed national interest, was never entertained.

Excellence now and forever

The assumption that British universities were global leaders who defined the excellence of global public goods had a pragmatic grounding in reputational rankings and patterns of cross-border student mobility. The UK-centrism of interviewees lay not in their recognition of these realities, but in their lack of reflexivity about the conditions that sustained Britain's global role. Most saw British leadership as both natural and constant. It was taken for granted. Policy maker and regulator P-2 attributed the UK's 'very, very strong position' to the English language, and 'it's not America' (also P-6). There was almost no discussion of the primacy of UK and US universities in the systems whereby global knowledge is defined (Marginson & Xu, 2023), a factor that, like global English, underpins their world status and international student flows; nor was there awareness that this epistemic primacy could be challenged. There was surprisingly little attention to rising China, East Asia, and

India, which was complicating both British primacy in the global space and the character of the global public good in higher education. However, U-14, U-18, and P-10 did note the shifting global landscape and saw British advantages as diminishing:

> It's essential to break down the insularity and the complacency of the discourse on who and what we are as a nation… if you give people a list of names of countries and said, 'ok, which of these are third-world countries?' they would probably [include] Malaysia or Thailand … if you were to send them to work or do a training course in Kuala Lumpur and Bangkok, they would come back absolutely flabbergasted by the speed and scale of economic development in those countries and the way in which the use of technology and the information and transport infrastructure of those cities is developing so rapidly… it's extremely worrying that people believe that this country is a world leader on the basis of zero evidence.
> U-18, university 3, faculty, languages

However, there was no reflection on coloniality in this or other interviews. We can speculate that a non-British interviewee might see the UK position as a former coloniser and a present neo-coloniser as central to the discussion of higher education and global public good, for example in relation to reparative justice (Sriprakash, 2023). It was a striking silence. It suggests that interviewees either had not broken from Imperialism or preferred to avoid the topic. There was more humility about Brexit. Interviewees worried about lost European research funding (e.g. U-14) and the disruption of student mobility and EU citizen staff (U-3, U-15, U-18). Brexit was seen as a national and global bad (U-7, U-20) that fostered national insularity (U-17), especially towards Europe (U-16, U-18, U-19). A senior leader-manager reflected on the damage in global markets if 'everybody thinks we're an island full of small-minded closet racists' (U-16). One international student from an EU nation stated simply that Brexit 'says that they don't want us' (U-26). She wished that she had enrolled in another country.

Commercialisation and global inequity

All interviewees identified global inequities in higher education and research. Most saw this as implying a responsibility for institutions in the UK, a 'richer and more fortunate country' (P-5), as part of their contributions to the global public good (e.g. also U-9. P-2, P-10), though the nature of that responsibility and the remedies it implied were unclear.

Whether England's universities themselves fostered global inequity was a more difficult topic. Their global role, especially in international education, could scarcely be dressed up as egalitarian, based as it was on a claimed superiority. P-7 stated that 'internationalisation is really, really tricky'. It could be 'essentially extractive, that takes advantage', or 'enabling and improving'. There were varied positions on brain drain from the global South. No one disputed the net transfer of talent into British universities and society, given that many international students had 'no intention of going back home' (U-25). Interviewees saw the maximisation of inward talent flows, an explicit goal of university strategy (e.g. U-14, U-16, U-22), as positive because it was positive for the UK. Two interviewees rationalised it as brain circulation that in the long run benefitted all countries (U-1, P-6). Only P-7 and a first-degree student from Italy (U-26) were wholly frank about the downsides of brain drain.

As noted, interviewees in university 3 were asked about the implications of the inward student flows for global equity. A follow-up question asked if international fee-paying

education was an 'elite pursuit' that fostered social inequalities in student source countries. The question was more troubling because the three universities had policy commitments to widening access and participation of domestic students in England. Equitable access was treated as a national public good but not a global public good. If it became a global public good, it would conflict with the maximisation of net revenues. Interviewees struggled to conceive equity in the global scale. Answers to this interview question were often unclear.

> I'm not sure. I don't know how you measure the contribution of international exchange to social inequality. Those social inequalities exist; it's not helping to reduce them, that's definitely the case. I suppose the answer is going to be things like bursaries, grants … but I think perhaps the benefits outweigh the costs… I don't think that's an argument for people to stay at home. You know what I mean?
> U-17, university 3, mid level leader-manager, languages
> That is very hard to answer, really.
> U-22, university 3, senior manager-leader

For U-24, it was a matter of 'balance'; 'it depends on what one wants to see'; and there was no 'right or wrong'. It was possible to identify the 'negative impact' from fee-based education but there were also 'many positive implications'. For U-16, regardless of whether the students came from local social elites, they could create 'extraordinary public good' on their return. He passed the responsibility for equity back to the student source countries.

> Does it matter that we just have loads of rich kids come and study here? I don't think it does. Actually, it's up to those countries to do scholarships.
> U-16, university 3, senior manager-leader

U-20 could not dismiss the question as readily as U-16. 'We have to take that potential criticism and … play that back to ourselves internally'. However, an economics professor at university 2 thought that there was no way through to equity. Commercial international student fees subsidised part of the cost of both research and the teaching of domestic students in England. This generated national public benefits. 'But if it is just national public good then … it's a market area' in the global scale (U-9). It was not a global public good.

An international doctoral student (U-23) called for financial equivalence between domestic and international research students. U-19 and U-25 advocated scholarships provided in UK. Likewise, for U-20, the only way to pursue equity was to invest income from international student fees in 'a large number of scholarships for incoming full degree students' from 'countries either with challenges in their own education systems or developing countries'. The students should be drawn from diverse countries, and some scholarships should have a condition that required students to return. But how could this work within the logic of the commercial international education programme, where the maximised revenues were being used to support a range of university activities? No one really thought it was going to happen.

Commercialism excludes other goals

Given the multiple missions of higher education in England, it was striking the extent to which recruiting fee-paying non-EU international students had become so essential that global educational goals were subordinated to it. Some (but by no means all) interviewees noted this skew in the moral framework: 'There's lip service to "internationalisation", but what the university management means by it is how can we get the highest fee-paying

students in' (U-11, see also U-20). While international education was partly about personal opportunity and development, 'obviously there's a financial dimension to this. You would be stupid to ignore that, and it's probably the main driver' (U-17). When asked specifically about the public good spill-overs associated with diverse classrooms with large numbers of international students, a professor at university 3 went straight to the corporate good: 'there is the revenue benefits of course. These students pay incredibly high fees' (U-25). Later in the interview, there was this exchange:

> Q. What do you think is the eventual goal of international student mobility from an institution's perspective. What should we really be focusing on and prioritising?
> A. The bottom line is that it's primarily financial in most cases but … they should be prioritising building a relationship with these students.
> U-25, university 3, professor, politics

This suggested a humanist second objective. But it was not what it seemed. The interviewee went on to state that the purpose of 'building a relationship' was not educational, or pastoral care; it was to cultivate the students as alumni, to 'promote using them to promote the university as a great place to get an education' (U-25; see also U-19). Claims about the social and educational benefits of international education were little monitored but the financial goals were clear. One senior leader at university 1 stated that:

> We float financially on international students, I think we just need to be honest about it… we all talk about taking international students because we want to diversify the classroom, because we want global citizenship, etc., that's all true, but frankly there is no government regulation on what we can charge them… as soon as you put any kind of restriction or social justice into the system we'd stop doing it … So every time you see a Chinese student struggling you say 'how can I help?' Because they pay our salary.
> Senior leader-manager, university 1, arts

For one faculty member at university 3, the problem was not the commercial mentalities of the university or its leaders; it was the system settings in England. While universities were still expected to constitute public good for society, they 'are being compelled to adopt an aggressively competitive attitude or stance within a marketised system'. Marketisation was incompatible with delivering public good in higher education 'because marketisation means that we no longer really belong to the public' (U-18). Higher education and public good was a non-problem, because the social had been evacuated.

> For private corporations, public service is an aspect of marketing but not … something which is fundamental to their existence and prosperity… We can't be both, a public service and a successful privatised corporation
> U-18, university 3, faculty, languages

Discussion and conclusions

What does higher education in England contribute to global public good in and through higher education? What do these interviews—which included university leaders in three research universities, senior regulators, and leaders of national organisations—tell us? Does English higher education make the whole world a better place, or just parts of it?

Since accelerated globalisation began in the early 1990s, UK government policy on higher education in England has favoured cross-border connections in research and has mostly fostered the growth of incoming international students. Many universities have been highly active in cross-border relations, in varying ways, in both education and research. Thousands of individuals have helped to build a global space in higher education in which British agents exercise an outsized influence. However, the scope for the shared global public good in higher education is maximised when the global space is constructed on the basis of common values, such as learning and knowledge as ends in themselves, and social relations are grounded in openness, distributed agency, diversity, and equality of respect. Then, the benefits for particular countries and institutions are part of a larger process.

Here, the outcome in England is disappointing, judging by these interviews. Global space making by British higher education in its own interest is not matched by an equivalent shared global public good.

Cross-border research

The picture differs somewhat between cross-border research and international education.

Much English global space making in research, which is shaped as much by individuals and disciplinary networks as by universities, constitutes clearcut global public good. Research entails norms of open knowledge creation, and many projects are collaborations focused on common global problems. English researchers make multiple contributions to open and collaborative knowledge: two-thirds of papers with UK authors have cross-border partners.

However, the public good contribution is a partial one. While epistemic collaboration can be, and to some extent is, conducted via 'flat' disciplinary relations that assume equality of respect (Marginson, 2022c), global research in England is also mediated by global status competition of researchers and universities, by Euro-American hegemony in knowledge, and by the gate-keeping role of leading universities in the UK and the USA (Marginson, 2022b). The global research network is open but on terms monopolised by a small number of agents. Massey (2005) calls this kind of relation 'the closed geographical imagination of openness' (p. 175).

International education

Cross-border student mobility is another matter. Following Brexit in 2016, the EU's Erasmus + mobility scheme was phased out. After 2020–2021 new EU degree students no longer paid tuition at English resident rates. Hence all inward international student movement became commercial in form, with a trickle of scholarships overwhelmed by the flood of fee-based places. As U-18 suggested, the market for domestic students installed in England in 2012 problematised the role of higher education in national public good(s); correspondingly, commercial international education problematised its role in global public good(s). The interviews show that the drive to maximise international revenues dominated institutional behaviours in the global space while reducing the scope for global public goods. While these interviews took place, the financial dependence of English universities on non-EU student fees was increasing sharply (Figs. 1 and 2). That process has continued since. If market-defined objectives were primary in 2017–2019 as numerous interviewees attested, they are likely to have become more primary in the half decade since most of the interviews took place.

International student fees set by universities at an average of £22,000 per first-degree student are wholly incompatible with equitable access, a universally recognised public good, let alone global justice and decolonisation. The fee-based market also has a larger impact on public good potentials. Fully commercial education demands a singularity of approach that empties out recognition of multiple university missions, including cross-cultural learning, as interviewees noted. There was considerable evidence about the undermixing of local and international students, and at university 3, there seems to have been failure to draw on the large international student population to enrich the curriculum. Cross-cultural learning as pursued by U-17 and U-18 was hemmed in by the standardised processing of large student populations at a minimum unit cost to maximise unit profitability. The university simply could not give much attention to fostering culturally plural experiences for all. These retarding effects also may have increased since the research.

It seemed to be difficult for most of the interviewees leading and managing fee-based programmes to be reflexive about the inherent mission tensions. They embraced the marketing-style premise that any and every cross-border action by British universities created public good (or at least some kind of good) in both the nation and the world. Often, when global equity or educational goals clashed with commercial goals, interviewees fell back on a normative discourse about virtuous internationalisation in which routine Anglophone university practices were the global script. This same normative discourse was also mobilised in making abstract claims about global/national/local synergies, in lieu of evidence.

Commercial and hierarchical relations in a sub-sector as large as British international education cannot close off all other possibilities for global action. There is Lefebvre's (1991) point that every space 'escapes in part from those who make use of it' (p. 26). International education nurtures nascent potentials for public good in the form of diverse university communities. All else being equal this must enable learning and understanding that otherwise would not occur. Yet, in the interviews, such non-transactional outcomes were largely opaque. Our research process was unable to fully capture effects outside the classroom. It may be that when international students gained a broader formative value from their education (Marginson, 2024b), a non-pecuniary individual public good, this happened more through their own efforts than through institutional or pedagogical design.

The Imperial spatial inheritance

In this study, interviewees did not reject global public good as such: there was widespread commitment to the idea. However, it was embraced to the extent that it coincided with national and institutional interest. Hence, while colonialism was ignored, Brexit's negative effects on cross-border relations were discussed: it impaired not just research cooperation but inward flows of funding and talent. Some interviewees simply equated the global public good with actions to secure national and university institutional status and revenues, as if their self-interest alone could generate worldwide good. Brain drain was brain circulation. Triggering a flow of alumni cash was humanist caring about graduates. Yet, the answers were more uneasy than cynical. The hegemonic commercial positioning of institutions devoted to learning and knowledge, in a world in which English universities were tied to foreigners to whom they felt both responsible and (much of the time) superior, had fostered a discursive landscape that was loose, contradictory, self-serving, and at times Orwellian. Direct questions in the interviews started to unpick the discourse and at times led to wild swings in the moral compass, as in the discussions about commercial international education and global equity.

In sum, while interviewees were keen to assert that their universities made the world a better place, this was more credible, and required less discursive gymnastics and moral inversions, in research than in fee-paying international education. But in research, too, the discussion was more about the good things that Britain did than the better world with better relationality it was helping to make. This trenchant UK-centrism suggests that it is more than neoliberalism that is limiting the contributions of English higher education to the global public good.

Materiality and imagination

English higher education has an attenuated scope to create global public good because of two broad factors. The first is *materiality*, the system settings of higher education, especially the market-based political economy of international education. A marketised system maximises attention to the individualised pecuniary goods and downplays non-pecuniary public goods both individual and collective. The second factor is the *global imaginings and choices* of agents. The two broad factors are combined.

UK-centrism and the claim to global superiority underpin the commercial positioning of the nation and its institutions in the global fee-based market. English universities, and the national system, citing parallel global university rankings framed by two competing London-based business services companies, present themselves as educationally superior to all other universities across the world, including the countries from which the international students come. By definition, they say, we add value to every student who enrols. That is their selling point—the claim to relative quality, not absolute quality—though it slides into a claim about absolute quality, as what they are really selling is global aristocratic prestige.

Given this global positioning, it is impossible to at the same time foster a shared global public good environment based on mutual respect, the positive role of diversity, and the enhancement of education and knowledge everywhere. Even the one-to-one gift of public goods across the border carries the sting that the agency and status of the recipients are diminished by the gift. The cultural form of those public goods excludes the culture of the receiver: the status hierarchy is continually hammered home. The interviews show that not only university leaders but administrators and most of the faculty were indifferent to the hubris entailed in the claims to global superiority, despite the flimsy basis of those claims in Anglophone rankings, and the cultural and educational costs of excluding non-Anglophone models and languages. This hierarchical discursive structure cannot lend itself to equitable and inclusive global public good. Consistent with this, there was little global mutuality in the interviews. Other countries were scarcely mentioned and there were no notions of a combined global vision. Many saw only one global good, their own. Only two people said they had changed their outlook through global work, and only three saw Britain from both inside and out. Global ecology—the most material exemplar of global public good—was rarely referenced. The world as a whole, as a shared project and common home, was briefly touched in abstract fashion.

While the two factors, material incentives and global imaginings, have been joined, they are also distinct. Notwithstanding the neoliberal regulation of English international education as a universal market, diverse agentic imaginings and actions *are possible*. The global scale is always ontologically open, with ever-emerging multiplicity (Massey, 2005), and agents have autonomy and choice when responding to structural conditions (Archer, 1995). Higher education practitioners can manage the imperatives of local and global competition in more than one way. Put simply, they can allow market relations to eliminate the public

good factor; or alternatively, they can develop relations of public good that modify the market.

Similarly, there is nothing inevitable about the particular global imaginaries and space-making strategies that are adopted by people in universities. For most interviewees in this study, despite the long experience of their institutions in Europe prior to Brexit, and the ongoing engagement with different parts of the world, their own institutions were the supreme standard by which others were judged. Not only did they market themselves as absolutely superior, they seemed to believe their own marketing. Given that these interviewees were likely more experienced and aware in global matters than most of the sector, this position seems very surprising, but it was common across the study. It was so common as to be culturally rather than individually nested. This requires explanation. What holds that nation-centric, nation-bounded, hierarchical global imaginary in place?

Immanent history

This takes us beyond the limits of semi-structured interviews. In his exposition of critical realism, Andrew Sayer (2000) argues that there is a category of social relations that are immanent rather than open to direct observation. Relations of class are of this character. Perhaps, the explanation for the shared global imaginary in this study lies in the Imperial history unacknowledged in the interviews and yet, in the absence of a decisive cultural refusal akin to that in Germany after 1945, still deeply ingrained in Englishness.

Here, direct evidence gives way to speculation based on indirect evidence. How far has English higher education moved from the Imperial mindset, with its unquestionable self-belief, its one-way flows of cultural imitation, and reverse flows of large-scale material exploitation, even its premise that distinctive other societies must be quaint or obsolete? Judging by most of the interviews, the answer is 'not far'. While some had a richer global understanding than others, there was still the elephant in the room. The stark geo-political reality of England's international education and research is that the inward transfers of capital and talent, and cultural hegemony, prolong neocolonial relations in the global scale. For an outsider, this is obvious and might be the central aspect of Britain's global position. It was not problematised by a single one of the 37 interviewees. This might be the most important finding in this study about English higher education and public good.

Interviewees drew on the Imperial spatial inheritance. There is the agentic confidence to move anywhere and intervene anywhere in the world at will, physically, virtually or in the imagination: the universal passport is the assumption of cultural/educational superiority. Yet while the whole university world is a free field of action, the agent is profoundly nation-centred and has no obligations to the good of the world. The world is not a home shared with others, it is a place from which value can be extracted (revenues, talent, soft power). There is an exchange between methodological nationalism and normative nationalism. The true patriot puts on methodological blinkers that ensure that the agent cannot engage deeply in other cultures or the world as a whole, which would disturb the entrenched national Imperial project. While one can be a nationalist committed to the global public good, one cannot also be an Imperialist. Methodological nationalism protects the Imperial identity.

The methodological nationalist sees action from within the national scale as necessary and sufficient to global effects. The UK-centric methodological nationalist sees British action as sufficient to move the world, and the Imperial UK-centric methodological nationalist is determined to do it. However, the global higher education space is a relational

setting with many other countries and institutions in play. The world is multi-polar in capacity, in both education and research, and becoming more so. Imperial methodological nationalism disqualifies England from cooperative participation. It blocks the kind of higher education cooperation pursued in Europe, or any other action that can achieve global public good.

This study underlines the fact that cross-border engagement alone is insufficient to create global public good in higher education. Cross-border relations grounded in mutual respect and shared interests are key. Though inequalities of global power are inevitable, closed reproductive hierarchies, which elevate the agency of some by diminishing others, are not. Fortunately, some interviewees could see more than one cultural perspective on the global, or were troubled by the contradictions in the business model. A few questioned British hubris. These thoughtful reflections suggested a larger global commonality could be built in England. Yet, none stepped right away from the bordered nation to achieve a transpositional approach, in which the whole world is the subject, and all agents are equally respected.

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Declarations

Conflict of interest The authors declare no competing interests.

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