

Global Higher Education in Times of Upheaval

*On Common Goods, Geopolitics
and Decolonization*

Simon Marginson

Global Higher Education in Times of Upheaval

Bloomsbury Higher Education Research

Series Editor: Simon Marginson

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Series Editor's Foreword

Global Higher Education in Times of Upheaval: On Common Goods, Geopolitics and Decolonization is published as part of the Bloomsbury Higher Education Research book series. This series brings to the public, government and universities across the world the ideas and research evidence generated by researchers from the ESRC Centre for Global Higher Education*, which was supported by £6.4 million in three successive ESRC awards from November 2015 to May 2024 and continues as an ESRC Legacy Centre in from 2024 to 2029. CGHE's founding director was Simon Marginson (2015–24) and its present director is David Mills. CGHE continues an active webinar and globally networked research programme in the Legacy Centre phase, which is supported by a small additional ESRC grant of £100,000.

The ESRC decision to fund CGHE constituted recognition of the growing importance of higher education and the associated research, in social, economic, cultural and political life. In 2022 there were more than 260 million enrolled tertiary students and more than 3 million new research papers entered the main bibliometric collections, Web of Science and Scopus. The creation of CGHE was also a recognition of the importance of the cross-border and global dimension. Globalization – global integration and convergence – is a contested and uneven process but it continues to roll out. A quarter of all published research papers involve joint authorship across national borders. A total of 7 million students worldwide cross borders for education of a year or more. Global movements of students, academics and researchers, knowledge, information and money help to shape not only nations but the international order itself. Worldwide capacity in higher education and research is becoming more plural. Whereas until the early 2000s Anglophone and Western European universities, together with Japan, were dominant at world level, rising universities and science in China, the rest of East Asia and Singapore are now reshaping worldwide flows of knowledge and higher education. The European Higher Education and Research Areas are

* ESRC refers to the UK Economic and Social Research Council. Part of the 2015–2020 ESRC funding that supported the first phase of Centre for Global Higher Education's research was sourced from the then Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE). Research England, one of HEFCE's successor bodies, provided financial support in 2020–2024 in CGHE's second award phase.

flourishing. Latin America, South East Asia, India, Central Asia and the Arab nations have a growing global importance. The trajectories of education and research in Sub-Saharan Africa are crucial to state-building and community development.

Perennial research questions about higher education continue. How can scarce public budgets provide for the public role of higher education institutions, for a socially equitable system of individual access, and for research excellence, all at the same time? What are the role for and limits of family financing and tuition loans systems, or should higher education be provided on a universal taxpayer funded basis, free of charge? What is the potential contribution of private institutions, including for-profit colleges? In national systems, what are the best balances between research-intensive and primarily teaching institutions, and between academic and vocational education? What are the potentials for online delivery and artificial intelligence in extending access, and knowledge? What is happening in graduate labour markets, where returns to degrees are becoming more dispersed between families with differing levels of income, different kinds of universities and different fields of study? Can larger education systems provide better for social mobility and income equality? How does the internationalization of universities contribute to national policy and local societies? Does mobile international education expand opportunity or further stratify societies? What are the implications of populist tensions between national and global goals, for higher education and research? What can national systems of higher education and science learn from each other, and how can they build stronger common ground and cooperate more effectively?

CGHE has taken investigation of some of these questions forward. During its full award period the centre was a partnership of researchers from fifteen UK and international universities, the world's largest concentration of expertise in relation to higher education and its social contributions. It employed over twenty people as postdocs and in junior researcher posts, and carried out fifteen discrete research projects in the first funding phase 2015–2020, continuing eight of these into the 2020–2024 phase, along with two new projects. In the 2015–2024 period CGHE's researchers generated 110 CGHE Working Papers; 35 CGHE Policy Briefings, short CGHE Research Findings and longer CGHE Research Reports; and 1,090 discrete publications in the academic and policy-related literatures, including books and journal papers.

Outputs from CGHE's affiliated researchers are continuing, with several longer-term CGHE projects producing substantial publication lists in the first year of the Legacy Centre, including those focused on student learning in STEM,

research in higher education, and the public good role of higher education. Information about CGHE's publications, webinars and other continuing activities can be found at <https://www.researchcghe.org/>. *Global Higher Education in Times of Upheaval: On Common Goods, Geopolitics and Decolonization* is the twelfth monograph in the Bloomsbury Higher Education Research series and the third to be published in a six-month period in 2025 and early 2026, all three of them available on an Open Access basis. More information on the Bloomsbury Higher Education Research series can be found at <https://www.bloomsbury.com/uk/series/bloomsbury-higher-education-research/>

Simon Marginson

Professor of Higher Education, University of Oxford and University of Bristol

Director, ESRC Centre for Global Higher Education 2015–2024

Editor, Bloomsbury Higher Education Research series

Preface and Acknowledgements

'All things are in flux, like a river... Everything flows.'

'Whoever cannot seek the unforeseen, sees nothing. The known way is an impasse.'

~ attributed to Heraclitus of Ephesus (544–484 BCE)

Global higher education in times of upheaval begins in debates in the English-speaking countries where I have worked in universities for over three decades. The concept framing Part I is the liberal ‘public’ and its meanings and limitations in higher education. In chapters 2–6 the normative social agenda is the struggle to render individualist Euro-American (Western) societies and their higher education systems more equal, critical and collectively responsible, while strengthening, not weakening, the agency and rights of the person. The educational agenda, the underlying source of hope, is student self-formation and social formation through shared learning and knowledge creation. Chapters 7–11 in Part II move into the global space where the liberalism of the Anglosphere is only one of the mindsets in play. Here the educational agenda is the limitless expansion of self-learning and knowledge in a plural world, on the basis of unity in diversity and learning through the other. In the global scale collectivity and interdependency are as important as they are in the national scale. Social diversity is more complex, the stakes are higher, especially in relation to global ecology and global political relations, and the uncertainty is greater. ‘All things are in flux’ and upheaval, everything is changing and the future is unknown. All we know is that ‘the known way is an impasse’ as Heraclitus said. We must make something different.

As this suggests, while the book begins in the Anglosphere in Chapters 1 and 2, its ultimate purpose is to see and understand global higher education through the lens of the interdependent *world as a whole* rather than the lens of any single nation or culture. By the time the final Chapter 11 on global common good is reached it begins to envision a forward path for global higher education through the unknown. To understand the world as a whole as it is and also as it could be, both the actual and the possible: in this lies the beginning of our freedom. And caring for the world as a whole means understanding its evolving multiplicity,

the changing manifestations of difference in all the forms that difference can take. And finding ways to learn and live together, combining the differences and solving the common problems. It is the supreme challenge for societies, and hence for education.

Most of the chapters had their beginnings in investigations conducted while I was director of the ESRC Centre for Global Higher Education (CGHE) in the UK, at University College London (2015 to 2018) and the University of Oxford (2018 to 2024). Ten of the twelve chapters use material developed for CGHE Working Papers and CGHE webinars. The main CGHE project that shaped this book, a cross-country study of the role of higher education in public good, underpins Chapters 2, 3, 6, 8 and part of 11: the first draft of Chapter 6 was a summary-reflection at the close of the funded CGHE award in April 2024. Chapters 7–11 started in inquiries into global spatiality in higher education and science during the CGHE award. Chapter 5 began in a CGHE webinar on employability and also draws on the chapters on equity and stratification in the *High participation systems of higher education* (2018) project with Brendan Cantwell and Anna Smolentseva. Chapter 4 on human capital theory began in a keynote to the annual conference of the Society for Research into Higher Education in December 2015. Details of earlier published versions of the main part of four of the chapters in the book are noted at the end of this Preface.

The point of *Global Higher Education in Times of Upheaval* has been to integrate these papers diverse in starting point, topic and method into a coherent whole, a single statement about higher education. The writing of the book was completed in 2025 after the first three months of the Trump/Vance administration's assault on university autonomy, academic freedoms and rights of protest in the United States. Inevitably day-to-day events are moving and changing but the author trusts that the main lines of the times have been captured here.

Long day's journey into neoliberalism

Part I of the book continues the sequence of the author's critiques of liberalism in its post-1975 form, high capitalist neoliberalism. These critiques began with analyses in the Australian Union of Students from 1975 to 1980, during the sudden transition from Keynesian demand management and welfare state policies to monetarism and New Right policy. The work on neoliberalism continued with a doctoral thesis at the University of Melbourne, published as *Markets in education* (1997), and the papers that comprised *Higher education*

and the common good (2016c). This critique of neoliberalism has had two related elements. First, neoliberal policy shapes a Hobbesian society riven by competition between sovereign individuals, indifferent to interdependency whether human or ecological. Neoliberalism evacuates the collective conditions of life unless they facilitate capital. Second, neoliberal policy and the marginalist economics from which it draws do not comprehend the specific character of higher education and knowledge. These are partly collective processes ill-fitted to the commodity form, possessive individualism and market exchange. Though learning and creativity have individualized moments, they are relational in their origins, gestation and expression. Hence the application of neoliberal systems inevitably distorts and reduces the potentials of higher education in society.

In the Anglosphere the evacuation of the social in higher education has become extreme. In England since 2012 the places occupied by three-quarters of first-degree students have been supported by no direct public funding at all. Uniquely in the world, student fees finance the collective public goods generated in higher education as well as the private benefits associated with degrees. Though states in the Anglosphere are losing some of their earlier faith in the automatic outcomes of market consumption and competition in higher education, there is no sign of an end to the shaping policy influence of neoliberal logics grounded in capital accumulation.

Nevertheless, political cultures in the Anglosphere (and elsewhere) contain more than one strand. In the Anglosphere the axis on which the politics of higher education has turned has been the epochal stand-off between neoliberal capitalism and liberal social democracy. The endogenous social democratic Anglo-American tradition, which exercised some influence in mainstream Keynesian economic policies between 1945 and 1975, fosters a more balanced relation between individual and social and progressively extends the collective conditions. Until the Reagan-Thatcher counter-revolution in the 1980s, states in the Anglosphere, some of the time, made strenuous efforts to build public resources that enlarged the freedom and capabilities of all, within which people could fashion their own trajectories. The late Australian historian Stuart Macintyre, whose voice we miss, illuminates the highpoint of those policies in his book on post-war reconstruction, *Australia's boldest experiment* (2015), and the Australian achievement has its equivalent in the post-1945 welfare state in Britain. The post-1945 drive to build a shared public space has not been entirely extinguished. Public schooling continues to be animated by it, and the widening participation agenda in higher education intersects with social democratic sensibilities. The last British survivor of the post-war welfare state, the National

Health Service, was still free and universal in April 2025. Despite chronic and severe under-funding it retains almost total public support. Social democracy offers better prospects and conditions of life than does competitive capitalism. The common commitment to the good of all provides more lasting fellowship and security than does venting nativist anger in echo chambers in social media and white supremacist rallies to 'take back control'.

The critique of sovereign individualism and the building of the common remain crucial tasks in the years ahead. Yet something is missing in this polarity within liberalism, between neoliberalism and social democracy. It does not exhaust the possible and liberalism does not contain all the elements needed to build the common, especially in the global scale. The liberal social democratic critique of neoliberalism begins with the premise that our freedom is maximized under conditions of social equality and the political agency of all. That is right but it leaves aside the constitution of the collective, the question of interdependence. When every individual shares equal rights, the question of how to build and sustain the social still remains to be solved. Solidarity is the third principle of the French Revolution, the one often neglected but essential to the realization of freedom and equality. Yet the neglect of solidarity is not an accident. Liberalism with its self-referencing individual always leans in that direction. Fortunately, not all societies are on the trajectory from Greece and Rome through the Enlightenment and the French and American revolutions. Questions of relations between individual and social are not confined to the West and are handled differently and in diverse ways in the non-West, where collectivity has often been more developed.

If Euro-American societies are good at some things, they are less good in others. Much is gained by engaging fully with the diversity of political cultures. Inescapably, also, if the West remains culture-bound, that will block the global common good. We need larger solutions. Relations of global diversity are a front-rank issue in general and in higher education, and the critique of neoliberalism needs to grapple directly with neocoloniality. The productivity, mindsets, limits and pathologies of Western capitalism are inseparable from coloniality.

Global multiplicity and equality of respect

Hence this book and especially Part II is also about plurality (multiplicity) in society and the world, and in higher education and knowledge, and about the possibilities of a tolerant global order based on collective common good and

equality of respect. About how we might move beyond the splintered ultra-individualism, grounded in the monoculture that is Anglo-American capital accumulation writ large. An ultra-individualism that rather than extending individual agency and democratic plurality leads to their collapse into the coercive monopoly of the mega-rich. An ultra-individualism that will destroy human society and the Earth itself if we allow this to happen. And about higher education and knowledge as both problem and solution in the evolution of a plural, inclusive and collaborative global order. That global order is the condition for jointly addressing the crisis in the biosphere.

The Western-dominated era, in general and in higher education, is passing, though not all in the West yet realize this. If we are not to fragment into warring cultures imprisoned behind impassable walls, controlled by corporate overlords with their tech and military machines, the denizens of 'end times fascism' and the survivalist capitalism (Klein and Taylor, 2025) brilliantly anticipated in Tim Winton's novel *Juice* (2024), the question is, what will be the content of the next tending-to-universal knowledge? What might be the new kind of emerging globalization that brings hope rather than disaster? How will the differing world cultures be enmeshed? The point is that now the Anglo-American hegemony is fragmenting, the next tending-to-universal knowledge will be multiple and hybrid if it is to be universal at all. And in this evolution there is much at stake. One premise that animates this book is that we are more likely to survive if we open our eyes to the diversity of knowledge, drawing on all the wisdoms, in the short time that we have left to rebuild our relations with each other and with the Earth.

A nativist revolt in the UK and much of the West may not seem a fortuitous time to argue for cultural plurality and cultural respect and against the taken-for-granted dominance of any one culture. Nevertheless, I am sure that in the global setting, *he er butong* (harmony in diversity) is the only path that makes sense. Though *he er butong* generates a raft of practical questions, working through that detail is the way forward. Harmony in diversity is the only general formula so far devised that enables each of the interdependent communities to evolve with free agency, while rendering difference as a resource not a problem, and also while addressing crucial questions of common values and peaceful relations within the whole. Harmony in diversity transcends the 'might is right' world, whether 'might' is measured as military weight or as economic power. Harmony in diversity is not solely utopian. In governance the European Union has already taken steps (early, tentative, contested) on this path. People in higher education already practice harmony in diversity to some degree, especially in intellectual fields in which multiple conversations are the norm, in shared inquiries into

global problems, in the fashioning of university alliances, and in cosmopolitan learning and teaching. In harmony in diversity we nurture the best of our own traditions while opening ourselves to others. It is difficult and it is exciting.

For myself the process of de-centring, learning that my Anglo-Australian birth culture was just another culture rather than a normal by which all else is judged, a process that is by no means completed, was especially advanced by a 2004 encounter with old and new Japan, most of all in Kyoto; a 2007 first visit to China, including Shanghai and a Beijing Forum organized as an inter-civilizational dialogue; and also in 2007, visits to the Ancient Mayan civilization in Palenque, Uxmal and Chichen Itza. The last can most clearly make the point about cultural plurality.

Consider the observations of Arthur Demarest at the end of *Ancient Maya: The rise and fall of a rainforest civilisation* (2004). Demarest reflects on the Mayan mathematics and astronomy, which exceeded medieval Europe, the art and architecture, the mosaic-planted farming that in ecological terms was superior to the one crop agriculture prevalent today, the hydraulic and urban organization, the household-produced goods and distinctive trading economy, the theatre-state governance. Demarest gives the Maya the bottomless dignity which every culture deserves but is rarely expressed, except sometimes for classical Greece, or Sumer, or the Tang. 'The study of the Maya is fascinating precisely because their civilization appears to be so different from our own' (p. 296). Little is learned if we see Mayan civilization, which lasted for almost a thousand years, four times as long as our present techno-industrial civilization, as an inferior underdeveloped version of ourselves. The Maya grappled with the same questions of the meaning of time and the universe, existence and death, which preoccupy us, though their answers were often unfamiliar. All of us are in the darkness, says Demarest. The Maya 'can be regarded as fellow travellers – who simply chose a different path – through the darkness' (p. 297). We have something to gain from the Maya, from their familiar and unfamiliar problems, from their victories and defeats, as we contemplate our own.

Post-hegemonic Anglo-American societies could learn much that is different and useful from non-Anglo systems and societies, including those, such as the Nordic world and China, Japan and Vietnam, that are better at collectivity. Here there are positive signs. The global context is evolving quickly. Non-Western societies are gaining a decisive increase in traction that promises an end to the five-hundred-year sequence of Western colonialism.

This most welcome development has prompted a fearsome reaction. The rise of the non-West, together with anxieties driven by the climate-nature emergency, and the immiseration of populations by neoliberal economics, are the clues to understanding the new higher education politics and

geopolitics: the Western pushback against globalism, the upsurge of nativism and resistance to global people mobility, the fracture of scientific cooperation as the United States struggles to constrain the global trajectory of China, and in some countries the ferocious attacks on science and university autonomy. All this has configured a post-neoliberal era that rather than being a rejection of neoliberalism is better understood as neoliberalism plus. The plus consists of more brittle but more assertive and arbitrary states. The continued capitalist logic in economic policy is now accompanied by resolute nation-centrism, often loosely or tightly coupled with populist-conservatism and its white supremacist rejection of plural identities and global relations. The sovereign individualism (the topic of Part I) that haunts the West, especially the Anglosphere with its unabashed capital accumulation by unaccountable individuals, has embedded structural parallels in sovereign nationalism (the topic of Part II), the pursuit of unabashed national-interest and the self-accumulation of nation-state power in global relations. Global common good is undeveloped, global democratic governance has hardly begun and global climate negotiations are sinking.

To repeat, the ultimate challenge is to create a viable global order that respects and negotiates diversity. This is the way forward, in higher education, ecology and human affairs. Yet that evolution is delayed by the partial breakdown of politics in some Western countries. For leaders of the nativist far right, universities, science and cosmopolitanism are threats to identity that cannot be corrected and must be broken, while the corporate leaders financing the far right want to obliterate the common good of environmental science so as to weaken opposition to their private enrichment. The far right rejects the strengths rather than the weaknesses of the liberal order, including university freedoms to learn, teach and inquire. Despite vague gestures towards economic compensation for national working classes, it leaves the motor of accumulative capitalism untouched. The Trump political agenda is to wholly suborn science, the universities and their internationalism. The US American version of Humboldtian institutional autonomy and academic freedom, with its entrepreneurial twist and its characteristic civic engagement, has been foundational to the agency of higher education institutions, faculty and students in many other national systems, whether or not they have adopted the US market ideology. If that model of university breaks in the United States, it is damaged in other countries. Much is at stake.

Yet the fact must be faced that after four decades of neoliberal self-interest in the economy and higher education, defending the university in high individualist Anglo-American societies is not easy. In this setting there

is a danger that the care of institutions, students and faculty will be seen as benefitting no-one but themselves. The visceral populist-conservative challenge can only be met by transcending both the politics of national-racial exclusion and the liberal capitalist mindset. We must reach for something very different, a relational society that is not only premised on openness and inclusion but is one in which *individuality and social collectivity are equally valued*. This makes urgent the question of higher education and the common good, which animates and concludes this book. Higher education for the common good has local, national and global meanings. It includes the potentials of higher education and knowledge that move beyond national identity alone to embrace the whole world as a subject, and move beyond self-enclosed institutions and persons to contribute to the evolution of open social relations premised in humanity and diversity, equal respect and all of the freedoms. All of the freedoms except those of capital and war. A human society grounded not in fear, hatred, ignorance, me-me-me and singular branded identities at war with each other, but grounded in multiplicity, solidarity, agency, self-learning, shared learning and hope.

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These chapters have been shaped by an open ontology and a Heraclitan sensibility of becoming rather than being, qualities that I trust are apparent throughout the book; by engagement with Karl Marx that was a starting point in that ontology; and more recent work with Margaret Archer, Doreen Massey, and the output of the last years of Michel Foucault. Foucault's turn to the pre-Christian Hellenic and his ideas of self-formation and truth through otherness speak closely to my own observations and experiences. Recovery of the pre-Christian might be the first step out of the West's present predicament and a condition for developing much-needed hybridities with thinking in the non-West. Foucault's early death, like those of Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart and Franz Schubert, is a wound that never heals.

There are also biographical roots. Two principles apparent in this book, the refusal of colonialism and the commitment to social democracy, entered my family after my grandfather's time in the trenches on the Western front during the First World War. Those principles, reproduced by my parents, Betty and Ray Marginson, have been continually confirmed by my own experiences and by world events, including the latest and most terrible: the systematic application of brutal technology in the genocidal settler state horror in Gaza. Social democracy

and the critique of capital are lifelong commitments: here I stand and can do no other. If the dream of a world beyond capitalism is broken we will revive it. We always do. Transfer to the U.K. in 2013 brought my inherited anti-coloniality to the surface, and this was confirmed by Brexit in 2016, a monumental error of historic proportions fuelled by residual imperialism. But family background is not sufficient to explain the one-world globalism in these pages.

My parents' anti-coloniality, that of the post-1945 Australian Labor Party, was expressed in a mild Australian nationalism. From an early age I imagined the global space in different terms. It was clear that nationalism was not the antidote to either colonialism or inter-state war because nationalism was deeply implicated in both problems. I conceived one-world globalism, thinking-through-the-world, from my own reading and reflection. The world as a single political subject has been with me at least since the early teens. I remember arguing one-world versus nationalism at school at age 14. This perspective was strengthened by the images of the earth from space that were current at that time, reinforced in my early 20s when I learned about the post-national and anti-war thinking of the second international, and normalized repeatedly by global ecology. I am grateful to Darta Antonio whose doctoral insights helped me to Massey's spatiality, to Riyad Shahjahan for the determined exit from the national container that runs through all of his writing, and to Lili Yang and Xin Xu for the Chinese globalism constituted by world-centred tianxia. We all have multiple identities: the question is what should take priority. Since first thinking of it, I have always given priority to one-world globalism. 'My country right or wrong' seems to me arbitrary and artificial, a cardboard cut-out of identity that necessarily excludes the other and the possibility of common good.

In addition to the discussions in these pages I have pursued other inquiries into higher education and knowledge, some with colleagues and students, on higher education as student self-formation, the worldwide growth of participation in education, positional competition and social allocation in education, the impact of Brexit in the UK sector, and higher education and science in China. Conscious of the omission of these issues and others, I am thinking about future books on (a) higher education in society, and (b) global science.

There are profound joys in working on texts that we take completely seriously; the continuous reflexive process of shaping one's evolving understanding; nosing forward in the face of the unknown, mostly centimetre by centimetre and sometimes, rarely, in leaps and bounds. That inner conversation, which artificial general intelligence cannot wholly replicate, ensures that we are

never lonely or bored in the face of the shrieking void that is existence. It is also a conversation that is chronically unsatisfactory, never finished, but one that has rewarding moments. As Clive James (2015) said, looking through the window at the Japanese maple in his garden: 'Glimpses are all you ever get. There is so little time'. The final chapters of the book took shape in a compressed nine weeks in the northern winter of 2024/5, waiting for spring, the good season in England, playing Nina Simone and Joni Mitchell and differing covers of 'I think it's going to rain today' and 'Carolina in my mind'. I'm not sure why I like that song so much but I do. I am fortunate more than I can say in my wife Anna Smolentseva and Sasha in Oxford, and in Ana Rosa in Melbourne. 'We love you and we need you'. And fortunate also in Mozart, Bach and Foucault. They did what they could in the time that they had. It is all that any of us can do.

* * * * *

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Introduction: Problems of Higher Education

The imperatives that have moulded the American university are at work around the world.

~ Clark Kerr, *The Uses of the University*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, 1963/2001, p. 65

Introduction: Higher education in an unstable world

What is higher education¹? In formal terms it consists of institutionalized programmes of learning beyond the secondary school stage, leading to qualifications. It is now provided in almost every country. It is very old. It is also new. The currently practised forms of higher education have been deeply shaped by ancient roots, yet in most countries its social role has been created or transformed in the last twenty to forty years, coinciding with the processes of worldwide convergence and integration called 'globalization'. Long an elite and marginal activity, higher education has become increasingly central to communities, nations and the world, with active connections between its institutions and most other social sectors. Positioned by policy makers everywhere as a driver of what is said to be the 'global knowledge economy', it absorbs large public and private resources. Worldwide, approaching half of young people enrol in post-school education – more than three in four of them entering degree programmes, mostly in institutions designated as 'universities' – and while higher education and research always had a cross-border dimension,

¹ In this book 'higher education' is equated with UNESCO's 'tertiary education'. UNESCO's (2022) ISCED classifications sort education on the basis not of institutions but programmes (courses) of study. Its tertiary education includes all programmes at its ISCED levels 5–8, ranging from sub-degree certificate and diploma courses, e.g. two-year programmes below degree level as in US community colleges, to doctoral degrees.

the sector is now more international and global than before, partly because the world itself is more globally enmeshed.

Plainly higher education and the associated research constitute a modern success story and it should be allowed to just get on with it. And so the matter rests. Or does it?

No, it does not. The world is changing quickly. Higher education and the associated science are politicized, given their scale and importance this is irreversible, and they will never be allowed to 'just get on with it'. Higher education and science are socially valuable resources and processes that are facing multiple challenges that need to be understood. Capacity in higher education and research is now multipolar on the world scale, and higher education is travelling better in some countries than others, though all systems have been disturbed by the upheavals generated by strident nationalism and fractured geopolitics. 'Upheaval' means the ground is shifting under feet and that is what is happening.

The purposes of *Global higher education in times of upheaval* are both explanatory and normative: to understand higher education as it is and to argue (especially in the final chapter) for something better. The book investigates the destabilization of higher education in an unstable world, particularly higher education and science in the Anglosphere, primarily the United States and the UK, long positioned in a leading global role in universities. The United States, especially, has been the fountainhead for the forms and achievements of contemporary higher education and research as Clark Kerr suggested. US higher education with its location in a high capitalist and globally hegemonic polity also harbours the limitations and flaws in the neoliberal and neocolonial model, limitations that have touched systems beyond the Anglosphere. Yet Anglo-American higher education could contribute nationally and globally without the devices of neoliberal regulation and the exercise of neocolonial control. It does not have to be hegemonic.

The chapters are mostly grounded in the author's history in the UK, prior to that in the similar Australian system, and engagement in the United States especially in 2014 (Marginson, 2016a). It reflects on Anglo-American institutions in the national and the global scale, in the larger global context and with regard to their relations with higher education elsewhere.

The book does not attempt a worldwide survey. Little is specifically focused on East Asia (but see Marginson, 2011a; 2022a; Marginson and Xu, 2022) or India (see Chattopadhyay et al., 2021) or UK-EU relations (Highman et al., 2023; Papatsiba and Marginson, 2025). Rather, the story is primarily about the limits of higher education in the Anglo-American neoliberal systems,

and how to move beyond those limits, with due regard for the world as a whole. It is particularly concerned with the failure of the English-speaking countries to clarify the role of higher education in the public good or common good and ground the sector more effectively in society; about the negative consequences of higher education policies focused exclusively on investment in human capital, private earnings benefits and the imagined 'global knowledge economy'; and about the need for the Anglo-American countries to adjust more successfully and with less hubris to the multi-polar world now taking shape in general and in higher education.

Though the development of multi-polar capability in higher education and science has made the world less comfortable for the Anglo-American powers in some respects, it must be seen as unambiguously positive. Higher education and science have a crucial and powerful potential in furthering the global common good in the face of the challenge of the climate-nature emergency and the problems of extreme weather events, habitat and species loss, food and water security, and global epidemiology, not to mention the challenges of social and political organization: achieving ecologically friendly economies, establishing collaborative and constructive relations at world level, and moving towards viable global governance. Higher education contributes through the self-formation of graduates with proactive and cosmopolitan agency, aware of others and the social world, valuing and protecting difference; and higher education is the most important single site for creating and openly circulating knowledge that is continually and routinely subjected to the test of truth.

As noted in the Preface to the book, Part I discusses higher education, its social relations and problems of the public and common good primarily at the national system level, without excluding the global scale. The core issue in Part I is the ultra-individualism of the neoliberal model of higher education and the apparent suppression of its collective contributions, including social criticism, the furthering of equality and the formation of students as proactive social actors.

The five chapters in Part II examine higher education and research in terms of global space, space making, geopolitics and the global common good. The core issue of Part II is like that of Part I but in the global scale – self-bound individualism (in this case a blinkered kind of nationalism) weakens the interdependent global whole. Higher education has been deployed in the Anglo-American countries as a national, neocolonial and homogenizing tool. This has weakened its contribution to global common good, including

relations of justice and equality, and undermined respect for and the valuation of multiplicity/diversity. Yet this is not inevitable. Potentially higher education and the associated research and scholarship have much to contribute at world level because they can understand and further diversity.

The remainder of this first chapter proceeds as follows. First, there is a brief (and schematic) history of higher education which identifies long-term features that helps to explain the contemporary sector. This is followed by an outline in the global scale of the expansion of participation in higher education, the growth of networked science, and rising cross-border student mobility, which together underline the unprecedented social centrality and global presence of the sector. The final section of the chapter focuses on present issues, challenges and problems, especially for higher education in the Anglosphere, in the light of the politics and geopolitics. This is followed by a brief introduction to each of the Chapters 2–11 that follow.

Cultural roots

Higher education has plural cultural roots (Perkin, 2007). The first recognizable form about which there is reasonable certainty was the preparation of scholar-officials in the Western Zhou dynasty in China (1046–771 BCE), beginning a tradition that evolved continually for almost three thousand years. For the most part higher education in Imperial China was not learning for its own sake but for practical purposes: the self-cultivation and selection of officials to serve the state. Their preparation was ordered in Imperial academies and came to be grounded in classical Confucian texts and artistic skills. Beginning in the Han dynasty (202 BCE–220 CE) and extended in later dynasties (and much later spreading to Europe), student selection was determined by competitive examinations. Under Empress Wu Zetian (690–705 CE), the sole female monarch of the Tang (618–907 CE) at the peak of the dynasty, the meritocratically determined scholar officials became elevated above the aristocracy in government. The role of the academies in China, and the number of educated graduates, expanded successively under the Song, Yuan and Ming dynasties. The academy model continued to dominate higher education in China until the end of the Imperial period in 1911 CE, and though the new universities that emerged from the late nineteenth century onwards were heavily influenced by Western models, the Imperial principles of service to the

state and applied rather than solely theoretical knowledge remain influential in Chinese higher education today. Another kind of institution also emerged, during the Tang dynasty, the private shuyuan that were devoted to scholarly pursuits in their own right.

For almost two millennia after 600 BCE, scholarly Buddhist monasteries flourished in Northern India, including Taxila, Vikramashila and Nalanda. Some became great centres of learning and technological expertise that welcomed visitors from all over West and Central Asia, Southeast Asia and East Asia. It is said that the Nalanda library housed more than ten million books. However, the monasteries in Northern India were violently destroyed by Bakhtiyar Khalji, the ruler of Bengal, at the end of the twelfth century CE. The ancient Greek world housed Plato's Academy in Athens from 387 BCE, and the library and mouseion at Alexandria, which peaked between 280 and 150 BCE and fostered not only education but experimental science. Another form of higher education was the Islamic madrasas of higher learning that developed in mosques in centres like Damascus and Cordoba. Cordoba, the capital of Muslim Spain between 716 and 1031 CE, disseminated into Europe key works of Greek and Roman scholarship, including Plato, Aristotle and Galen, stimulating curricula in the early European universities. The madrasa of higher learning that was founded in Fez in Morocco in 859 CE, which later became the University of al-Qarawiyyin, is said to be the oldest university that has had continuous existence. In Japan the Tokugawa han schools educated samurai in high culture and useful arts. In the pre-Columbian Americas the civilizations of the Inca and the Aztec also developed forms of higher education.

The European universities began with Bologna in Italy in 1088 CE, followed among those still in existence by Paris in France, Oxford and later Cambridge in England, and Salamanca in Spain. The medieval European institutions, termed studium generale, were outgrowths of the Catholic church and founded by Papal charters. However, and crucially, they became legally incorporated and this enabled them to exercise partial autonomy in a sliver of space between the church, city and state. Beginning with theology, they moved into law and medicine, and later mathematics and sciences. As with the Buddhist monasteries in India, medieval higher education in Europe was both fixed by its location in city and state, and at the same time mobile: Latin was the common language of learning, knowledge was cast in universal terms, and students and teachers could move to universities anywhere else. Teaching was

led by 'Masters', faculty with a qualification, and at the University of Toulouse, which opened in 1229 the Papal charter declared its Masters were permitted to teach in any other university without a further examination. This portability of qualification became the norm throughout Europe.

The constant core of higher education

Though higher had plural roots, its historic forms were (and are) also remarkably similar and constant between the different modes and also throughout history – with one important exception. First, all forms of higher education involved, and still involve, teaching and learning designed for the formation and self-formation of students as educated subjects. The constant core, the abiding process of higher education, is *the cultural formation of persons*, in what Biesta (2009) calls the functions of 'socialization' into social norms and practices, and 'subjectification', the formation and self-formation of students as autonomous persons capable of reflexive action on their own behalf (Marginson, 2024a). Even more remarkably, the technical methods of person formation have also been largely constant. Since the Western Zhou dynasty three thousand years ago the student has been immersed in *knowledge* and guided by teachers. Everywhere the same devices have been employed: knowledge expressed in scripts or texts, the classroom form of organization, and later, methods of educational assessment, student selection by examination, and certification.

This intrinsic core of cultural formation in higher education has been joined to many different extrinsic social purposes, from the training of state officials in China, to religious formation, scholarship and scholarly expertise in the Indian monasteries and Islamic Cordoba and Damascus, to those purposes plus the training of lawyers and doctors in medieval Europe, to the preparation of graduates in a great range of occupations across the world today. Yet all of these extrinsic purposes have been (and are) achieved via the same cultural core of learning, knowledge, teachers, texts, classes, examinations and certificates.

Most of the different forms of higher education have had another common feature: a *dual spatiality*. As in the medieval European universities and Buddhist scholarly monasteries, so also in the research university today – though not quite in every institution offering degrees and diplomas – higher education combines a place-bound materiality and identity, with universalizing knowledge and mobility of ideas and persons. Students and scholars travel between centres of learning. Knowledge and communications flow freely. This space making beyond the nation helps to sustain the partial autonomy of universities. They

cannot be wholly suborned by a nation-state because they are also in a sense always somewhere else.

Research universities

Hence when the one big change happened in 1810, it eventually went everywhere. That was von Humboldt's plan for the University of Berlin, which was the birth of modern higher education and especially the research university. Von Humboldt added intellectual inquiry and research to the intrinsic core of learning and knowledge. He argued that instead of reproducing knowledge as a fixed dogma universities should conduct critical inquiry and scientific investigation. This changed the nature of knowledge. Scholarship was opened to scepticism, testing and change. Yet higher education was still a process of cultural formation.

The historical autonomy of European universities was foundational to von Humboldt's blueprint. He believed that universities should serve the state, but on the basis of freedom to learn and teach, and the unity of teaching and research. The doctoral science university spread in nineteenth-century Germany and was admired in the emerging United States. At the time J.H. Newman's *Idea of a University* (1854), focused on the cultivation of individual students in knowledge and values, was more influential than the German model in Britain, though Newman was to be ultimately unsuccessful in his attempt to exclude occupational training and the research function from universities either in Britain or anywhere else.

This was because in the United States the German rather than English model shaped the future. After Johns Hopkins University was founded in 1876 as a doctoral university along German lines, the research university norm spread quickly to Harvard and the other leading institutions. The US sector also added distinctive features. The successive US Morrill Acts founded the land grant universities – which like other settler state American institutions were erected on land seized from the endogenous inhabitants (Stein, 2022) – with a practical bent, concerned with engineering, agricultural education, business studies and applied research. US universities also developed boards of trustees which brought civic and business leaders into institutional governance earlier than elsewhere. In the twentieth century both the research and service missions spread rapidly in the United States while teaching only teachers' colleges and community colleges also emerged, alongside the universities.

Onwards and upwards

If higher education began with plural roots, its history in the twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, when it evolved into a central institution of society, was one of global hegemony and homogenization in which the US institutions exercised the main influence, as University of California President Clark Kerr predicted in 1963.

From the 1950s onwards in the richer countries, spreading across the world in the 1990s and after, and lasting at least until the late 2010s, the long trajectory of higher education was onwards and upwards. Universities, colleges and other institutions accumulated ever more degree programmes, students, academic talent and external purposes and functions. The Second World War US Manhattan Project and atomic weapons had affirmed in a compelling way the strategic potentials of science and technology, and hence of university research, though it took time for other countries to follow: in 1960, 69 per cent of world R&D was still located in the United States (Congressional Research Service, 2022). The United States also pioneered the first mass higher education, cemented in the educational aid for returning soldiers after the War. The 1960 California Master Plan guaranteed places for all qualified students. By 1970 the Gross Tertiary Enrolment Ratio in the United States was 50 per cent of the age cohort (World Bank, 2025).

The 1950s and 1960s were the great days of the US American research university (Marginson, 2016a). Clark Kerr (1963) christened the growing institution the 'multiversity', arguing that multiplicity of roles and reach was its abiding character. He also argued, in anticipation of Richard Rorty's (1983) idea of post-modernism, that the multiversity had no unifying theme, no core, no single identity or purpose. Perhaps its purpose was itself, or its reputation. As its sites and infrastructure expanded, it absorbed more economic resources, fed an ever-growing range of productive activities and focused the hopes of ever more families. The multiversity, committed to massifying higher education and engaged simultaneously with states and public service, inner and outer economic markets of different kinds, the health and education systems, civil organizations and cultural activities, spread from the United States to influence emerging mass higher education in the economically advantaged Euro-American West, the erstwhile colonial powers, and then fanned out to the majority of countries. This institutional model is still radiating outwards.

In the early 1990s a networked global science system began to develop via the fledgling Internet: within two decades it dominated authoritative knowledge in the natural science-based fields (see Chapter 9). In the late 1990s and early

2000s governments absorbed the idea of the 'global knowledge economy' propagated by the World Bank and the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), that positioned higher education and research as key instruments of the nation's capital accumulation and global competitiveness (Dale, 2005; Olssen and Peters, 2005; Robertson, 2005). To cement the economic positioning governments sought to tie universities more closely into capitalist relations, using system marketization via competition for status and resources, corporate autonomy, user charges, quasi-commodity forms of higher education outputs and performative management (Marginson and Considine, 2000).

At the same time many nations set out to build and sustain 'World-class universities' (WCUs) as measured in the global university rankings, based on Anglo-American templates, that emerged in 2003 and 2004. WCU policies legitimated vertically stratified systems, with institutions becoming more unequal in status and resources over time. The global research university model was essentially Kerr's multiversity plus cross-border elements that embedded US-led globalization (see Chapter 7). Universities figured as WCUs in global rankings when they excelled in high citation research, internationally co-authored science, and in some rankings, reputation in global surveys, and the proportion of faculty and students who were non-citizens (Marginson, 2014b). In the West, at first, global profiles integrated more or less seamlessly with the local-national roles of institutions.

Like the multiversity before it, the WCU idea had normalizing impact. Although the Anglo-American model was in partial cultural tension with non-Western systems, emerging nations often measured their progress in terms of global rankings. In China and Singapore the leading universities came to excel in terms of the Anglo-American standards by building exceptional capacity in natural science-based research. In Latin America the bulk of university scholarship remained in national languages and there was sharp criticism of the imposed hegemonic global norms. In Sub-Saharan Africa and most of South and Central Asia capacity was not sufficiently developed for universities to figure in global rankings, and the effect of global ranking was to blatantly suborn the national systems and emphasize global vertical stratification.

Global higher education

Figures 1.1 to 1.3 snapshot the transformation in the social role of higher education and university-based research, after economic and cultural

globalization gathered pace from 1990 onwards. They illustrate the vast growth in student participation in higher education, the rapid expansion of global science, and the increase in cross-border student mobility. To repeat the point, these developments rest on the same largely pre-modern core of cultural formation long traditional to higher education: student personal-cognitive growth through immersion in knowledge, within institutions in which teaching and learning are joined to academic scholarship, research and certification.

Student participation: Figure 1.1 shows the world Gross Tertiary Education Enrolment Ratio (GTER), the proportion of the primary school age cohort entering tertiary education. As noted on page 1, in the present book 'higher education' is equated with 'tertiary education' as defined by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO, 2022).

Between 1970 and the mid-1990s the global GTER rose in tandem with global Gross Domestic Product (GDP). The GTER of 10 per cent in 1970 was still only 14 per cent in 1991, though it was higher in some countries, and had reached 71 per cent in the United States. Then the enrolment in many countries began to climb sharply (World Bank, 2025). The growing participation in tertiary education correlated with industrialization, urbanization and the expansion of the middle classes (Kharas, 2017). For example, in 1991, 43.4 per cent of the world labour force was in agriculture. As Global South populations streamed into the cities agricultural labour dropped to 26.4 per cent by 2023 while the urban share of

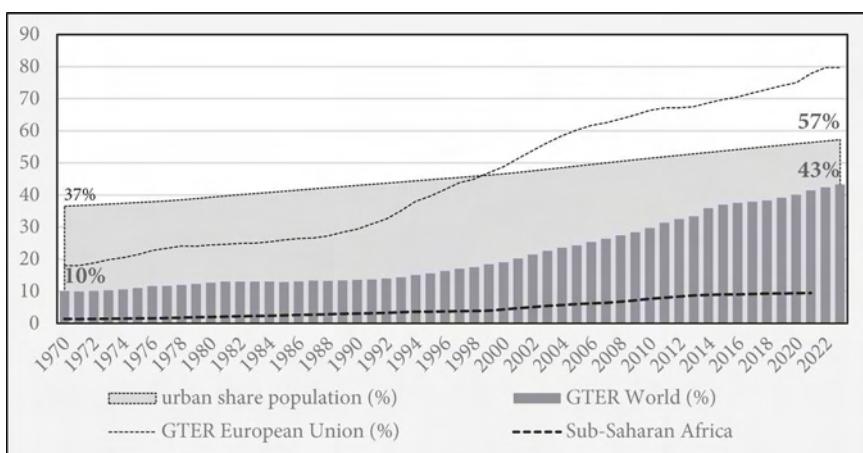


Figure 1.1 Gross Tertiary Enrolment Ratio (%) in the world and the European Union, compared to the worldwide proportion (%) of the population living in cities: 1970 to 2023.

Source: World Bank, 2025.

total world population rose from 43.3 in 1991 to 56.8 per cent in 2023, and the GTER from 13.3 to 43.3 per cent, so that the worldwide enrolment reached 263.9 million tertiary/higher education students in 2023 (World Bank, 2025).

After 2000 the global rate of participation advanced by more than one percentage point a year. In more than seventy systems in 2023 the GTER exceeded 50 per cent, compared to four such systems in 1991 (United States, Canada, Finland, Russian Federation). By 2023 the GTER was 79 per cent in the European Union, 62 per cent in East Asia and the Pacific, and 58 per cent in Latin America and the Caribbean, though only 29 per cent in South Asia, and below 10 per cent in Sub-Saharan Africa in 2021, the last year for which data were available (World Bank, 2025).

By the 2010s there was dynamic growth in higher education enrolments in all but the poorest one-fifth of countries which lacked the public and private resources to finance the necessary educational infrastructure. Only in one country did participation fall significantly, though it was an important case: the United States, where the GTER dropped from 88.9 to 79.4 per cent between 2015 and 2022 (World Bank, 2025) (see Chapter 5). Reviewing the trend to high participation in higher education systems, Brendan Cantwell and colleagues (2018) found that growth was not causally driven in linear fashion by either identifiable economic demand for skills or government planning. While a base level of economic resources and a decline in the role of subsistence agriculture in the economy seemed to be necessary conditions, economic factors were not sufficient to explain educational growth. GTERs were rising rapidly in both high and low growth economies, whether led by manufacturing, commodities or services.

As Martin Trow (1973) forecast in a seminal paper, the key factor in the growth of participation is social rather than economic: family demand for opportunities for student children. Both social demand and tertiary provision become concentrated in cities, which explains the evidently close match between advancing urbanization and advancing education. As participation moves from a small minority to a social norm, the career and earnings benefits become more uncertain, but degrees retain their role as markers of social distinction, while the lifelong penalties attached to non-participation increase. The last becomes the main driver of enrolment, pushing it towards universal levels. As participation increases an ever-growing proportion of families invest hope and resources in educational futures, pressuring governments to provide more opportunities. For their part government find it easier to expand places in secondary and higher education than to directly create jobs. That states are more followers than

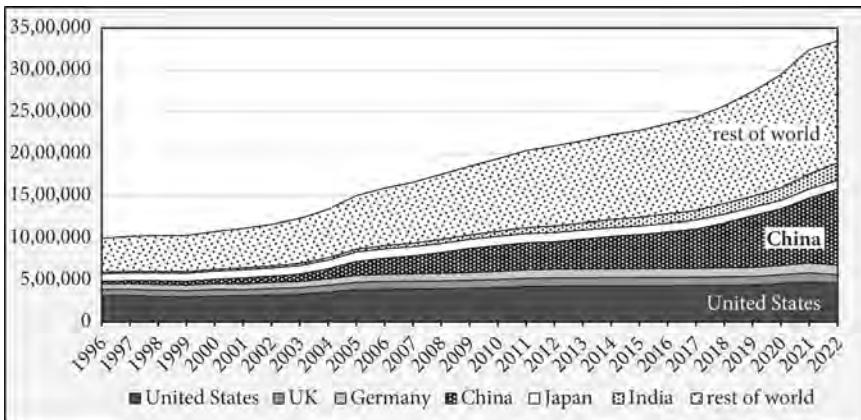


Figure 1.2 Number of science papers in Scopus by large country/world region: 1996 to 2022.

Source: NSB (2024 and earlier years).

planners of educational growth is confirmed by the fact that participation rates generally rise over time and rarely seem to fall. All of this clarifies the reasons why, although higher education was stable at the level of a small minority of the population for most of its history, it begins to expand rapidly to much larger social reach once massification takes hold.

Global science. The joining up of the internet in 1989 provided the essential condition for the evolution of the networked synchronous global science system. The proportion of the world's population with internet access reached 1 per cent in 1995 and 10 per cent in 2002, diversifying the means of direct participation in research networks (World Bank, 2025).

Figure 1.2 shows that the annual number of published science papers in Scopus, one of the two principal data repositories for globally recognized science production, increased from 992,538 in 1996 to 3,344,037 in 2022 (NSB, 2024 and previous years). 'Science' here includes social science and a smaller number of papers in arts and humanities.

Between 1996 and 2022 the average annual rate of increase in global science papers was almost 4.8 per cent a year, rising to 5 per cent plus after the turn of the century. Science also became intensively networked on an international basis. In 1996, 12.2 per cent of all published papers had authors from more than one country. This rose each year to peak at 23.2 per cent in 2020 before falling slightly to 22.6 per cent in 2022 (NSB, 2024). In short, there has been a vast expansion in the common pool of knowledge and in the cooperative relations that underpin it. In the process global science has acquired iconic status. Though

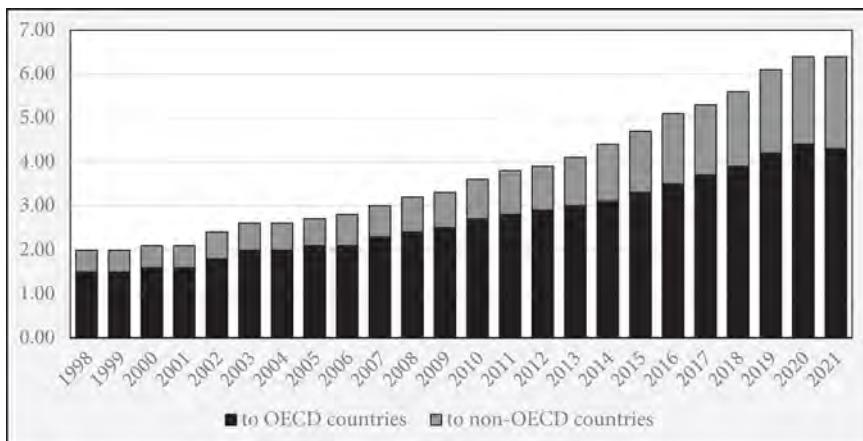


Figure 1.3 Number (millions) of cross-border higher education students enrolled for one year or more, World: 1998 to 2021.

Source: UNESCO, 2025.

most of the world's knowledge, especially that in languages other than English, falls outside the codified global science repositories, global papers are the epistemic leaders in nearly all the natural science-based disciplines (see Chapter 9 for a fuller discussion of global science).

Cross-border students. Figure 1.3 demonstrates the growth in the number of students moving across national borders for educational purposes for one year or more.² The total rose from 1.9 million students in 1998 to 6.9 million in 2022, a rate of growth of more than 5 per cent a year. After a small fall in 2021 due to the Covid-19 pandemic the long-term growth pattern resumed (UNESCO, 2024). The figures also show that countries outside the OECD played a growing role in educating cross-border students, for example, China, the Russian Federation and Malaysia.

These data do not include shorter stay periods such as study abroad for a semester or a few weeks. In 2022 students on the move were 2.6 per cent of the world higher education enrolment (UNESCO, 2024) but cross-border ('international') higher education played a larger role in countries in the Anglosphere, including Australia (23 per cent of all students), the UK (22 per cent) and Canada (19 per cent) – all providing commercial international education designed to part-fund their higher education systems – 19 per cent

² This is not a perfect measure of cross-border mobility: in a minority of countries including Canada, South Korea, Turkey and the United States these data include all non-citizen students (including resident foreigners) as well as cross-border students whose normal residence is outside the country of education. See OECD (2024, p. 245).

also in Austria and Switzerland, and 17 per cent in the Netherlands (OECD, 2024, p. 245). The 2.6 per cent of students that crossed borders for education in 2022 was not much greater than the 2.2 per cent in 1998 but the volume of students had more than tripled (UNESCO, 2024), magnifying the impact on institutions, localities and economies. Some institutions became much more internationalized than their predecessors, at least in terms of student composition. The potential for migration resistance was also exacerbated.

A fragile success

Higher education institutions have become part of the social core alongside schooling, health and hospitals, transport and communications, banking and finance. The notion that research universities are key players in the global knowledge economy confers on them a world as well as national role. At first sight, in countries where universities and research have long been established, they seem almost as solid as the state. Yet higher education and its core functions – learning and teaching via immersion in knowledge, the certification of graduates, and academic scholarship and science – might be more fragile than they look. As is the case with government most of the time, higher education is associated with endemic frustration, disappointed expectations on a large scale. Its structures are less all-embracing and robust than those of government and some of its functions are easier to replicate.

Warning signs

There are warning signs for higher education in the way it is being impacted by a range of problems pertaining to mission and identity, at the same time. The problems are uneven on the world scale. At the time of writing in April 2025 higher education was travelling well with broad social and governmental support in much of East and Southeast Asia, including China, Singapore and South Korea; and growing rapidly in parts of the global South, including very large countries such as India and Indonesia, though state under-funding and exploitative for-profit provision set limits on provision. However, vivid warning signs were showing themselves in the nations that were hitherto dominant on the world scale, the Euro-American nations, especially the Anglosphere – the United States, Canada, the UK, Australia and New Zealand – which in the case

of the United States and UK, as noted, have constituted the standard models of higher education institution and system, set the language of global science, and provided the dominant template for global comparisons and rankings.

First, the location of higher education in the political economy, and the conventional social compact that supports its institutional structure and funding, are in question. In many countries, mass higher education systems are handling record numbers of students in slow-growth economies. Graduate unemployment is rising and questions about graduate 'employability' bite more deeply. In some nations, especially in the Anglosphere, in which neoliberal economics leads higher education policy, there now seem to be doubts in government and the public sphere about the core functions of higher education in learning, knowledge and certification. Within the neoliberal framework there is scepticism about whether higher education delivers the expected economic outcomes and indifference to its larger contributions to collective social life, beyond the generation of pecuniary benefits and upward mobility for individuals. Correspondingly, there is no consensus about the respective roles of state and students in funding higher education institutions, while state support has eroded. Furthermore, given that mass higher education has failed to generate the hoped for growth of social mobility in what remain relatively unequal societies, there is no longer clarity on whether higher education should keep expanding towards inclusion of the whole population, or should focus on serving the middle-class families who dominate access to the more prestigious universities and degrees and seem to extract clear value from the system.

Second, global ecology, the inherited neo-colonial global order, the relations between the United States and China, and between Russia and the West, and national politics in many countries (again, especially in the Euro-American West) are all in upheaval. Power on the world scale is pluralizing with the rise of much of the global East and South but the hitherto dominant Western countries, especially the United States and UK, have not adjusted to the multipolar setting. The destabilization of global geopolitics and the ambiguous global position of the English-speaking countries are impacting higher education and research at many points. There are multiple difficulties in cross-border student and faculty movement and cross-border research collaboration. In the Anglosphere the global standing and international relations of global research universities, which have signified their status, power and revenues, have become a source of suspicion in parts of the domestic political environment.

Third, higher education and science in the West, including in the United States (where the problem is well advanced) and the UK, face multiple direct political challenges from far-right populist and conservative politics. In the last decade aggressively nativist, anti-cosmopolitan and often-anti-intellectual agendas have collided with universities at many points. The socio-political divide between graduates and non-graduates, fostered by anti-elite posturing, now influences elections. The 2016 Brexit vote in the UK and the Trump campaigns in the United States reflected this polarization. In a strange inversion of the status of degrees, in parts of the Make America Great Again (MAGA) movement in the United States, to be 'uneducated' is seen as a badge of honour. At the same time, in particular jurisdictions freedoms to teach, learn and inquire are under attack. Nativists everywhere focus critically on cosmopolitan universities with their multiple identities, multiple cross-border associations and large populations of foreign faculty and students. The Hungarian government prohibits gender studies and has forcibly expelled the internationally funded and independent-minded Central European University. The De Santis administration in Florida bans critical race theory in the classroom. Fossil-fuel funded campaigns discredit climate researchers in the United States. The first three months of the second Trump administration have seen bans on gender factors and minority positive discrimination in faculty hiring; the expulsion of over a thousand international students, some (but by no means all) associated with pro-Palestine protests; and demands focused on universities including Columbia, Princeton, Cornell and Harvard, for changes to curricula and research and the suppression of the civil and political rights of students. These demands have been backed coercively by the withdrawal of federal funds and threats to remove tax exemptions. The Trump regime has made no secret of its intention to break the social power of the leading universities.

In this political setting higher education institutions, lacking either consistent state support or a popular base, have struggled (Davies, 2023). The normative academic missions of truth-driven learning, tolerance of plurality, curiosity-driven inquiry and reasoned public debate are undermined simultaneously and in differing ways by commercial marketing culture, machine learning, critique by conservative organizations and angry social media partisans. In the public sphere universities are just another vested interest, ineffective influencers with a wooden style of discourse and complex messages that do not play. Turnbull et al. (2024) argue that recent critiques of and attacks on universities in England, Australia, Hungary and Brazil have moved beyond neoliberal precepts alone and are grounded in diverse values and agendas, including governments that

want to intervene forcefully to secure desired economic outcomes from higher education, opponents of mass participation in higher education, and populist and conservative critics waging culture wars against liberal intellectual values. The conjunction of these criticisms is ominous (see Chapters 5 and 6).

These political developments, taken together, constitute protracted challenges to the inherited mission and character of higher education and research, primarily (but not only) in the West including the Anglo-American jurisdictions. Higher education everywhere is nested in states. Institutional autonomy has always been partial, but it can take varying forms. The neoliberal governance that took root in the 1990s preserved university autonomy (albeit in corporate form) while emptying out collective objectives. Now there is growing potential for and examples of breaches of academic control in the core domains of curriculum design, student learning and research. These developments constitute a more direct threat to higher education than does neoliberalism. In pushing universities onto the defensive, governmental and populist-conservative critics weaken the positive agency of the institutions, and of individual scholars and students, and undermine their social contributions. Universities are not as robust as states, which are more accustomed to multiple criticisms. When universities are positioned like beached whales in a hostile public space, this has consequences for societies. It slows the dissemination of social and scientific literacy and technologies. It weakens the efficacy of independent truth-based responses to the climate-nature emergency and global epidemiology. It undermines the self-formation of critically minded graduates able to see through the barrage of disinformation, toxic emotionalism, and racist and misogynist propaganda that have come to dominate much of the electronic public space.

Over-individualized and over-sold

Domains in which there have been the most changes in the mission and nature of higher education – the massification of participation, and the partial globalization of knowledge and people flows – are in question. Yet higher education is vulnerable not just because it is now the target of well-funded political campaigns. It *is* such a target, especially in the United States. In addition, though, it is struggling because the sector itself and its policy advocates have sustained its phenomenal social rise by creating overblown expectations and undertakings that it is unable to fulfil. The growth of higher education can be explained as an expansion of shared human and citizen rights, and of individual and collective

agency and respect. These are sufficient motivations and unquestionably have been part of the growth of participation. But the augmentation of knowledge and common agency has also been joined to claims about more transactional and individualized outcomes. This is where the impossible promises have flourished.

Since the 1960s the expansion of higher education has been sold as the royal road to widespread social mobility and a more equal society, despite the fact that changes in higher education alone cannot redistribute the social patterning of opportunity and mobility. Also since the 1960s, and especially in the Anglosphere, investment in human capital has been presented as the charmed path to individual enrichment and national prosperity, although in itself higher education cannot transform the labour market or expand the number of well-paid jobs (Marginson, 1993b; see Chapters 4 and 5). Nor is innovation-focused research in a knowledge economy the magic driver of prosperity. The inevitable outcome has been a large-scale failure to fulfil the individual and the collective promises, fostering inevitable disillusionment, which in turn has facilitated neoliberal reductions in taxpayer financing per student and reduced expectations about higher education's social and global contributions. In many Western countries funding per student is falling, sharply in some (OECD, 2024).

In short, the collective potentials of higher education have been unduly individualized and elevated, higher education has been unable to fulfil the aggregated individual expectations, and the artificial gap in individual fulfilment has been weaponized so as to further diminish the collective potentials of the sector. This also points to the scale of the problem. In order to rebuild the collective and individual contributions of higher education, it is essential for higher education to contribute to remaking not just higher education but the larger relations between the individual and the social realm – in short, to begin to reconstruct the collective social domain (the common good) itself.

Conclusions

In the Anglosphere, and to a degree elsewhere in the West, the political flak currently impacting higher education and science is a symptom of longer problems that have evolved out of educational massification, neo-liberalism and globalization, in capitalist societies with endemically increasing inequality. Left unaddressed, these problems have festered, enlarging fault lines that are now being colonized politically by neoliberal and populist critics.

Higher education, especially in the Anglosphere, finds itself grappling with five unresolved problems which are discussed in this book:

1. ***The blockage of collective goods in an individualized framework.*** Higher education's contributions to collective society cannot be advanced in polities in which government determines that the outcomes of higher education, aside from basic research, can be exhaustively understood as pecuniary benefits for individuals. (See *Part I*, especially Chapters 2 and 6; *Part II*, especially Chapters 8–9, 11.)
2. ***The distortion of cultural formation in an economic framework.*** Higher education has always been a process of cultural formation through immersion in knowledge. Teaching/learning and research in organized disciplines are fundamental. Neoliberal policy solely focuses on the generation of human capital, defining outcomes in terms of individual graduate salaries ('employability') and collective national capital accumulation. It is essentially indifferent to knowledge contents which are the medium of learning, and undermines broader student learning and self-formation, and epistemic community, while creating economic expectations that higher education acting alone cannot meet. (*This problem is addressed especially in Chapters 4 and 5.*)
3. ***The fact of the impossibility of social equality through education alone.*** Higher education lifts many students from disadvantaged backgrounds but taken overall, when acting alone it cannot weaken the determining influence of social background on career and income, and thereby secure social mobility and/or redistribution on a transformative scale. Yet it is widely expected to equalize social opportunity. Again this expectation is impossible to meet. (*This problem is addressed in Chapter 5.*)
4. ***The dilemma of choice that should not be a choice between the national and global.*** Higher education has a dual spatiality, combining fixed locality and national identity with universalizing knowledge and the cross-border mobility and collaboration of ideas and people. Yet it is being pressured to give absolute priority to the national, suppressing its dual spatiality and its potential contribution to just and inclusive global relations and other global collective goods. (*Part II, throughout.*)
5. ***The blockage of cultural multiplicity in a uniform hegemonic framework.*** Learning and knowledge entail a multiplicity and diversity of languages, cultures, perspectives, epistemic disciplines, agendas and ideas. How can multiplicity be configured as unity-in-diversity, given political cultures and

forces that demand adherence to singular cultural identities and national interests? (*Part II, especially Chapters 7 and 11.*)

A note on method

Higher education studies are a site of inquiry rather than a bounded sub-discipline, though the field has its own journals. Studies of objects, issues and problems in higher education and the associated research activity draw on multiple branches of social science. In addition to literature in higher education studies and the author's own previous research and scholarship in that field, chapters in this book make use, some will say eclectically, of ideas and methods from political philosophy (especially in Chapter 2), human geography (especially in Chapter 7), studies of science (especially in Chapter 9), and history, political economy and sociology.

The two parts of the book each begin with an original theorization: of liberal public good in Chapter 2, and space making and globalization in Chapter 7. Chapters 2 and 6 on public and common good, Chapter 4 on human capital theory, part of Chapter 5 on employability and equality in higher education, and Chapter 10 on 'internationalization', have been organized as critical conceptual reviews that situate these policy-relevant concepts in historical, social and political context. These critiques have been developed in the light of empirical and conceptual literature in each topic area, as well as the author's observations and experiences in policy-related settings, and academic discussions and events. The ultimate test of validation of these chapters is how close they come to the realities they discuss. Chapters 3 and 8 using interviews in English higher education, and Chapter 9 which synthesizes global science, are more conventional empirical studies, with Chapter 9 largely resting on data and analyses from secondary sources. In the more normative and speculative final Chapter 11 on global common good in higher education, the book moves from the actual to the possible.

* * * * *

The next chapter is about what higher education can and cannot do when viewed through the lens of liberalism; the way high individualism in the Anglosphere shapes approaches to the funding, organization and practice of higher education; and how the lack of a clear sense of the common and collective in society holds back the potential contribution of the higher education sector.

Part One

Sovereign Individualism and Common Good in Higher Education

Public and Private Goods in Liberal Regimes

The ideas of economists and political philosophers, both when they are right and when they are wrong are more powerful than is commonly understood. Indeed, the world is ruled by little else ... [those] who believe themselves to be quite exempt from any intellectual influences, are usually the slaves of some defunct economist.

~ John Maynard Keynes, *The General Theory of Employment Interest and Money*, 1936, Macmillan, p. 383

This chapter theorizes and critically reviews the public domain, including 'public good' in higher education, in liberal Euro-American (Western) societies – especially ultra-liberal societies in the Anglosphere¹ such as that of the UK. It investigates the meanings and practices of 'public' and 'private' in relational settings in which the individual is a sovereign absolute, the collective character of society is unclear, and higher education is seen as a branch of the economy. The associated policies and practices have marked effects in the day-to-day functioning of higher education and the possibilities and limits of higher education's contributions to society and economy, and have long framed political debate.

* * * * *

Introduction: The question of public good

In the Anglosphere it is almost universally agreed that higher education is causally associated with individualized benefits for graduates, as augmented

¹ Differences between political cultures within the Anglosphere are not explored in the book, though they matter. The book focuses on common elements and its generalizations rest mostly on the UK (primarily), the United States and Australia. For Canada see, among others, Brewis et al. (2025).

earnings, rates of employment and social status; though the extent to which the advantages enjoyed by graduates are a product of education or their family backgrounds and continuing social capital is unclear. It is also widely, though not universally, agreed that higher education broadly contributes to the relational collective dimension of human society and thereby augments 'the public good'. Expectations of higher education institutions as public contributors are high, just as expectations of the state (i.e. government) are open-ended and high, despite the ideological ascendancy of the economic individual and the capitalist market. However, there is little clarity on what the public aspect or contribution of higher education means, and how it relates to the individualized private benefits for students and graduates. Are the private benefits of higher education nurtured within the public realm, or separated or even opposed to the public contribution made by the sector?

Many claims are routinely made by university leaders and ministers of education about the contributions of institutions to the 'community', 'common good', 'public interest', 'public good' or 'public goods'. Institutions are said to provide opportunity for all on the basis of merit; widen the scope for upward social mobility; enhance the careers and lives of those they educate; contribute to economic productivity and prosperity by preparing graduates for occupations, and supplying innovations for industry; provide employment in cities and regions; create and distribute knowledge and ideas, and advance free expression and critical thought; foster scientific literacy, and sustain intellectual conversations and artistic work; augment technological adoption, community infrastructures and public health; contribute to policy and government, and prepare citizens for democratic decision-making. Higher education institutions are said to elevate society beyond racism, sustain cosmopolitan outlooks and advance cross-border understanding. They encourage ecological awareness and find solutions to global problems. In short, there is little in shared human society that is untouched by the contributions of higher education.

However, while each of these statements is credible, and illustrations of each are readily found, this way of framing the public benefits of higher education lacks cut-through. The recurring claims appear as primarily normative and assumption driven (if not as spin from the university marketing department). Unlike private rates of return and employment, which can be expressed in monetary terms, claims about the public benefits are rarely associated with plausible measures. Nor is the public dimension understood as a unified field with one idea of 'public' across the range of activities and effects. In short,

discourse about the 'public' dimension is unclear and ambiguous. This ambiguity is not an accident, however. It has roots in liberal political cultures.

The chapter investigates the terms 'public' and 'public good(s)' in higher education, in liberal political cultures and primarily in the Anglosphere. It opens by reviewing the liberal approach to the public and private dimensions of society. It then considers, successively, the normative concept of '*the* public good' in higher education, and the public/private dualism in general and in higher education. The liberal public/private dualism has two related but not identical aspects: the economic dualism of public goods and private goods, and the jurisdictional distinction between public as state and all else as private. Expressed in matrix form the two public/private dualisms constitute four quadrants which encompass the full range of liberal political economies in higher education (see Figure 2.1, below). However, neoliberal government is narrower than liberalism as a whole, and the chapter also discusses other dimensions of 'public', including the critically minded public sphere, and the inclusive-communicative public of public opinion and public media, which has resonances in education access policies. The conclusion notes larger possibilities beyond the liberal world.

Public good, in general and in higher education, overlaps with but is not identical to 'common good', a concept which extends beyond liberalism. The distinction between public and common good is discussed in Chapter 6.

'Public' in liberal political culture

Euro-American liberal society had origins in the eighteenth-century rise of capitalism, the Enlightenment's identification of an individual with prior and natural freedom, the Enlightenment's constitutionalism, and the French Revolution's popular assembly and its decisive repudiation of feudal authority. Liberal society is classically divided between government-as-state with coercive powers; the capitalist economic market; civil society, with varying relations with the state; and the individual or household which has an ill-defined normative primacy. The state is further divided between the executive, elected legislature and autonomous judiciary. The public university, which is both state-referenced and partly autonomous, is another element in the division of powers.

All Euro-American societies abstract the individual from the social to some degree with varying levels of tension between them. The individual is imagined as prior to and separable from society (how this happened is discussed in

Chapter 6). Both the individual freedom to accumulate economic capital and freedom of political belief and expression are seen as foundational to the liberal order, though their respective priorities vary. The collective or common social good is hard to define in liberal societies which ground themselves in the free consent of autonomous individuals (Sievers in Symonds et al., 2022, p. 2).

The configuration of the division of powers varies within the West. Esping-Andersen (1990) distinguishes between 'three worlds of welfare capitalism'. In social democratic regimes, as in the Nordic countries, state-provided universal welfare promotes an equality of high standards rather than equality of minimal needs, or did so until neoliberal economics began to affect state policy (Valimaa and Muhonen, 2018). Conservative regimes as in central Europe position the family as the primary agent in welfare, with the state providing backup when the family mode is exhausted. In liberal regimes in the Anglosphere, in which the economic freedom to accumulate capital is seen as primary, and seen to determine the scope for political democracy, market solutions are preferred to governmental provision. The state typically subsidizes non-state actors in markets or expands the space for solely private activity. There are further variations. In France the revolution foregrounded freedom, equality and fraternity. Though capitalism fosters inequality, in the Republican ideal the state constitutes the civil and private spheres within which citizens flourish (Carpentier and Courtois, 2024).

Like other liberal regimes, nations in the Anglosphere sustain an extensive civil society which has blurred boundaries with the other parts of the liberal division of labour: the market, the state and the private sphere of home and family. This can strengthen the democratic element, though the civil sphere is structured by unequal relations of power. It also acts as a safety valve, with common citizenship softening the unequal valuation of persons generated by capitalist economic relations; and civil society partly compensating for the lacunae in and the reduced expectations of the state. At best civil societies are capable of solidarity as well as liberty, as Adam Smith (1759/2002) hoped. However, capitalist inequality and competition always tend to attenuate the potential for civil solidarity; and in neoliberal contexts, autarkic individuality seems to be stronger than civil collectivity.

Meanings of 'public'

The liberal division of powers is at the roots of the ambiguities of 'public' in English. There are multiple and partly contradictory meanings associated

with the term. The Shorter Oxford Dictionary entry for 'public' has two full columns totalling 44 centimetres of the printed edition (OED, 1993, pp. 2404–5). 'Public' variously refers to the whole social realm, the state, specific functions and programmes of the state, and civil society/the electorate. The term 'private' is associated with the market, civil society, the household or family, and the individual. In other words 'public' and 'private' are both separated and coexistent; and one dimension of society, civil society, is freely interpreted as both public and private.

The multiple meanings of 'public' include four primary strands: (1) '*the* public good' as a normative condition of universal welfare, well-being or beneficence (Mansbridge, 1998); (2) 'public goods' as half of a dualism with private goods, as used in neo-classical marginalist economics (Samuelson, 1954); (3) 'public' meaning state or government, as in 'public sector'; (4) public as an inclusive communicative whole population, as in 'public opinion', or 'the public sphere' (Fraser, 1990). All these meanings of 'public' have resonance in higher education, and the second and third embody the Anglo-American approach to policy.

Each of (1) to (4) is now considered.

The normative-universal public good

The original Roman 'public' referred to something pertaining to the concern of all the people. Outside its use in economics 'good' mostly implies ideal goods (Mansbridge and Boot, 2022). When used as a universal, 'public good' implies an ideal phenomenon or condition, or an event common to all. The concept is not only normative, it often also has a moral dimension, implying virtue. The normative public good sits alongside parallel normative universals such as 'democracy' or 'sustainability'. As such *the* public good and its application to higher education are problematic. The term is not only broad, it is vague. It 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 more specific the discussion becomes, the more difficult it is to hold agreement about the content of the public good. The universal-general public good is often highly politicized and open to numerous conflicting interests, meanings and claims.

In itself the diversity of meanings and agendas of the shared public good is no bad thing. Multiplicity is how the world works, and it creates an ongoing

possibility of change, as will be discussed further in Chapters 7 and 11. Individual people and their networks, organizations such as universities, and (on a good day) whole nations, can all learn and grow through their engagement with difference; and difference does not preclude the possibility of commonality on crucial points about living together in a relational society, such as religious toleration, freedom from violence or hunger, respect for nature or rights to education. Diversity about the shared public good should be the starting point for open conversation and negotiation around questions like 'what is the public good and how does higher education contribute?', 'who decides?', and 'how should this be discussed and determined?'

However, liberal societies rarely deploy practical mechanisms for democratically determining values, programmes and priorities for achieving the shared public good. Instead the public good is pre-set, overdetermined by relations of power in capitalist regimes, in which collectivity is fragmented and the scope to move resources and shape agendas is highly unequal (Lukes, 2021). Amid competing claims for the definition of the public good, some claims are more potent than others. Standard imaginings of the economy, national security and sovereign individualism are relentlessly imposed by states, corporations and mainstream media that are mostly in corporate hands. Not only many public good agendas, but also the very possibility of inclusive negotiation, are closed off. When everyone in society pursues their own interest, the determination of the public good/bad rests finally with the state, but states are shaped by those same unequalizing structures of social power.

Within higher education in the Anglosphere there is more plurality of values and agendas than is found in government. Institutions like universities are not normatively centralized in the manner of governments. Different parts of higher education service different notions of public good. Ecological research feeds into global sustainability, teacher training fosters education as meritocratic social opportunity, business studies are concerned with economic accumulation. Higher education harbours scope for shared 'public bad' as well as public good. Public bad too is subject to conflicting interpretations, but might include research for war machines, or social inequalities in stratified higher education systems. The large comprehensive 'multiversity' (Kerr, 1963) sits within wildly conflicting public good agendas and maintains a stake in all. It practices extensive climate change research and often takes extensive money from fossil-fuel companies and agribusiness. Plurality is endemic to the Euro-American university as an organization. Its own survival and flourishing, and the augmentation of its social prestige and power, are always primary, and

it gains from every social connection. However, its autonomy is only partial and from time to time the state steps in and attempts to impose its own understanding of the public good.

The public/private dualism

In the Nordic conception the public good encompasses the private good. Each advance in private welfare, freedom or prosperity advances the shared good, while the shared public good provides conditions for private good. However, a feature of the Anglosphere is that the relation between 'public' and 'private' is imagined as zero-sum, a dualism. That is, the more than something is 'public', the less it is 'private', and vice versa. This zero-sum public/private dualism has become dominant in higher education policy, primarily in relation to funding.

The public/private dualism in the Anglosphere has two distinct manifestations which overlap. The first, shared with political cultures around the world, is juridical-political: the distinction between the public and private sectors. Public sector activities are owned, practised and/or controlled by government. The private sector is everything else: non-state business and industry, civil organizations, and the individual and family. The second dualism, more specific to the Anglo-American countries though now influencing liberal policy on higher education in many other countries as well, is grounded in economic theory and ideology. That is the distinction between public goods and private goods. Public goods are non-market outcomes generated by government or philanthropy. Private goods are produced and exchanged in markets in order to generate profits and accumulate economic capital.

In popular usage the two dualisms are often combined: society is presented as a single zero-sum dualism between (public) state and (private) market. This is misleading. The two dualisms are not identical. A summative state/market dualism excludes private philanthropy, private sector activity that is non-market in character; and also excludes market-based activities by government in the public sector. Both of these domains, especially state-determined markets and corporations, are active in the neoliberal government of higher education.

Figure 2.1 (below) combines the two liberal dualisms in order to generate the full range of potential liberal policy frameworks, expressed in four quadrants, shaped by the distinctions between public sector/private sector, and non-market/market activity. Before the four quadrants are considered each public/private dualism will be discussed.

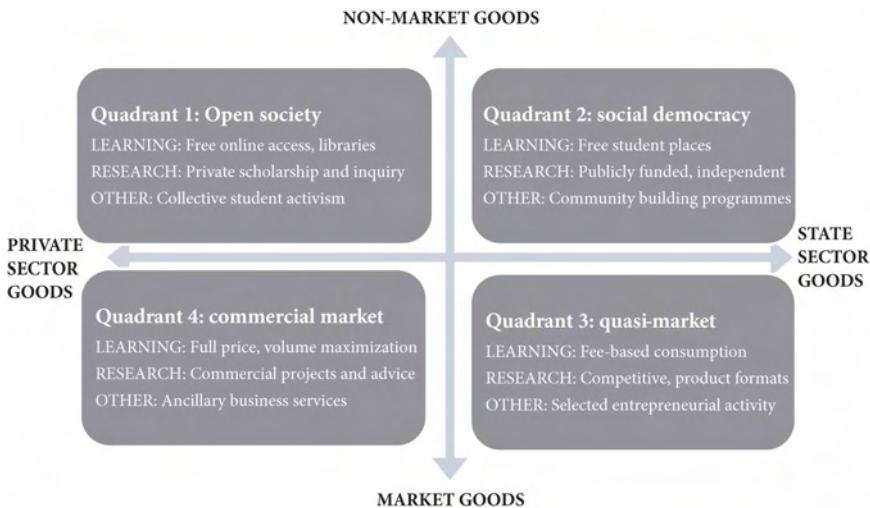


Figure 2.1 Public and private goods in higher education: The four possible liberal systems, with examples of activity in each quadrant (*not* exhaustive of all possible examples).

Note: The four quadrants are ideal types. Real life higher education institutions can have a presence in all four quadrants. However, national policy frameworks can tend towards one more than the others. Scandinavian systems are positioned largely in Quadrant 2, while systems in the Anglosphere are increasingly active in Quadrant 3.

Source: Author.

The non-market/market distinction in economics

In 'The Pure Theory of Public Expenditure' Paul Samuelson (1954) establishes the public/private relation now dominant in economic policy. Private goods are produced, packaged and sold as individualized commodities in markets. Public goods are one or both of non-rivalrous and non-excludable, which prevents them from generating profit. Goods are non-rivalrous when they can be consumed by any number of people without being depleted, for example, knowledge of a mathematical theorem, which sustains its use value indefinitely on the basis of free access. Goods are non-excludable when the benefits cannot be confined to individual buyers, like clean air regulation. Because public and part-public goods are subject to market failure, they require government funding or philanthropic support. They do not necessarily require full government financing, only enough to make them viable. They can be generated in either state or private institutions.

Samuelson's public/private goods have led to variations, including common-pool goods, rivalrous but non-excludable, such as a fishing zone; Buchanan's (1965) 'club goods', excludable but non-rivalrous until congestion occurs; and

Ostrom's (2010) 'toll goods', whereby all but a specific population are excluded and the good is non-rivalrous within the group. Merit goods are goods produced in either private or public sectors that are rivalrous or excludable but subsidized by government at point of use because it believes that otherwise the goods will be under-consumed, for example, because the private benefits are diffuse or long-term. All of these concepts have potential applications in higher education but the discussion here focuses on the core public/private goods distinction.

It is important to recognize that Samuelson's definition is not universal, applying to all human societies. It embodies the norms of a liberal capitalist society, which imagine an 'institutional world' divided between 'private property exchanges in a market setting and government-owned property organized by a public hierarchy' (Ostrom, 2010, p. 642). It is not applicable to a gift economy (Mauss, 1954/1990), or one grounded in communal or state-controlled property and production. Among capitalist societies, it is especially appropriate to Anglo-American political cultures grounded in strictly limited states and a zero-sum opposition between public and private. There the economic departments of state follow Samuelson in treating private business as the default producer, unless there is market failure in essential goods, at which point the state or philanthropy takes over. This policy approach maximizes the scope for trade and capital accumulation, while providing a simple zero-sum formula for the private/public split in financing goods like higher education and research. Government funds the good up to the extent of market failure but not beyond.

Public/private goods in higher education. What public/private goods are produced in higher education, in Samuelson's terms? The most important non-market public good is knowledge. Stiglitz (1999) demonstrates that knowledge, as in the mathematical theorem, is a classic Samuelson public good. New knowledge is exclusive to its creator and provides a first mover advantage. Patents prolong that advantage. However, to be used, knowledge must be communicated, and once communicated it retains value no matter how often it is used. It becomes non-rivalrous and non-excludable. Basic research is subject to market failure, and almost everywhere is funded by states or philanthropy. Particular embodiments of knowledge, like texts or artefacts, can be rendered excludable by property-based devices such as intellectual property law and journal pay-walls. However, privatization of knowledge artefacts is never wholly successful because of the ease with which they are reproduced.

The education function (learning, teaching and certification) is more ambiguous. Student places in higher education can constitute either Samuelson private or public goods. Mostly, they are a variable mix of both, and can differ

within one system. The public goods created by learning, teaching and certification include individualized non-market benefits such as better health outcomes and higher financial acumen of graduates (McMahon, 2018), and learned knowledge which is non-excludable and non-rivalrous. However, whenever university places confer value for persons in comparison with non-participation, there is rivalry; and where there is a surplus of applications over places, participation is excludable. A market in tuition becomes possible. The value of such private goods peaks in programmes offering students positional opportunities to enter scarce careers of high value, such as elite preparation in Law and Medicine. These positional goods are zero-sum (Hirsch, 1976). When one person occupies a place in Harvard Law, others cannot have it. Note that some Ivy League universities also create public goods. MIT, Harvard and Stanford offer free online public access to the contents of many taught programmes, without impairing the private value of their face-to-face degrees and the status and networking benefits they offer.

Samuelson presumes that whenever possible, goods such as education are produced on a market basis. That is not how the world works in practice. While some social goods, like national defence, are intrinsically collective and cannot be produced and consumed individually, other collective goods, such as public health or education, are collective to the extent that societies and states want them to be. The public/private character of education in Samuelson's sense is not naturalized but a matter of social philosophy and policy choice. It depends on the social processes (stratification and hierarchy, or equalization; creation of individual or collective value) that policy tolerates or secures. In stratified higher education systems with tuition barriers, as in the United States, prices mediate access, there is sharp inequality in the value of the goods, and graduates enjoy high rates of return by comparison with non-graduates. The private good element is strong. As noted, the more universal and less competitive Nordic societies provide higher education on the basis of free access to goods of high quality, and graduates in the same field but different universities have similar standing. Places are less rivalrous and excludable (Valimaa, 2011). Nevertheless, all Nordic graduates enjoy positional advantages over non-graduates, and there are scarce private goods of relatively higher value in certain fields such as medicine, where families compete for access. The fact that Nordic production of higher education is not formalized in an economic market reduces but does not wholly abolish value differentials. Limited private good aspects are maintained.

The policy choices lie on a wide spectrum between maximization and minimization of the potential for marketization. This brings the other public/private dualism into play.

The public/private sector distinction

The most straightforward meaning of ‘public’ is the state or public sector. The state includes multiple agencies, many of them state funded and all state regulated, coordinated from the centre of government. Notwithstanding the division of powers, Euro-American states exercise a general supervisory responsibility underpinned by legal and financial functions. The Samuelson economic formula positions the state in a residual role, whereby the state guarantees only that higher education which is both necessary and unprovided by markets. However, in practice, as noted, even neoliberal states are not confined to the residual role. Policy is never determined solely on the basis of rivalry, excludability and market failure (Mazzucato, 2023). Governments can always over-determine markets, though the extent of intervention varies. Everywhere states subject policy issues to a political as well as economic logic.

Whereas in much of Europe universities were (and sometimes still are) positioned as part of the public service, the larger separation of the Anglo-American universities, their positioning one step further from the centre of the state, has long been fiercely defended. Yet that autonomy does not translate into the scope to define the public good on an independent basis; and arguably, neoliberal competition for funding, and performance management, have tethered institutions more tightly to the state centre (Shattock and Horvath, 2020). In addition, in recent years, governments in the Anglosphere have been increasingly willing to intervene directly, for example, in the nature of programmes of study and the balance between disciplines (Turnbull et al., 2024). This is discussed further in Chapters 5 and 6.

While in practice the scope of the state extends beyond the residual role, the Samuelson formula has nevertheless proven functional for neoliberal governments. Samuelson minimizes the ambit of their responsibilities and the level of their spending, while creating space for commercial interests. He also provides a rationale for any and every increase in student tuition. Governments can readily invoke the mantra that the private individual benefits and hence the cost should be private. The narrow focus on scarcity and cost provides a reflexive mechanism for interrogating any public provision beyond the minimum necessary level. You can have a more ‘public’ approach than minimally necessary, Samuelson implies, but there are opportunity costs in doing so. The same scarce resources could be allocated elsewhere.

Four quadrants: The possible liberal systems

From a policy viewpoint each dualism of public/private has lacunae. Samuelson's economic approach to 'public' focusing on the non-market/market distinction, understands individualized goods better than collective goods. It grasps only naturalized public goods, not policy-determined public goods. The economic dualism identifies the minimum necessary public goods, but posits a zero-sum relation between public and private, and constrains the policy choices. However, it provides a handy formula for limiting social demand and cost. The state/non-state dualism is more flexible and effective than Samuelson in addressing collective goods and is open to a range of policy values. The state/non-state dualism renders the public/private relation a political choice, not a natural event, and is not tripped up by zero-sumism. But it is open to arbitrary policy action without limits on cost.

The non-market/market dualism and the state/non-state dualism are heterogeneous. However, in Anglo-American political cultures the two dualisms have also become intertwined. The Samuelson economic formula positions the state as an agent, while for its part the liberal state deploys Samuelson selectively at need. Each kind of public/private dualism fills a gap in the other, and each also provides a critical reflexivity for interrogating the other. This suggests that liberal regimes in higher education can be clarified by drawing the two definitions together, giving each definition equal weight while maintaining the distinction between them. Figure 2.1 combines the two dualisms in a four-way matrix.

Four frameworks for liberal policy on higher education and research

Figure 2.1 is arranged on two axes, based on the state/non-state distinction (vertical axis) and the non-market/market distinction (horizontal axis). The four quadrants represent four different political economies of higher education, which constitute the full set of potential political-economic systems in liberal regimes. Note that Figure 2.1 applies to *national* higher or tertiary education systems. Inclusion of cross-border education and knowledge flows changes the picture because there is no global state and hence no 'public goods' in the sense of state-controlled production – though Samuelson's definition of 'public' as non-market production is still relevant. Issues of global public good(s), and the distinct but overlapping question of global common good(s), are addressed in Chapters 6–8 and 11.

Educational or research activity can be positioned in Figure 2.1 according to the extent it is public (non-market) in Samuelson's economic sense and located

in Quadrants 1 or 2, and the extent it is public in the sense of public sector (state controlled) and in Quadrants 2 or 3. Education and research that is publicly funded – an economic public good – may be closely state controlled in Quadrant 2, or government funded into unregulated open society in Quadrant 1. Activity that is state controlled – a public sector public good – may be produced on a non-market basis in Quadrant 2, or on a market basis with competition and mixed funding in Quadrant 3. The purely public quadrant, which combines the economic definition of the non-market public with the fact of state public sector control, is located in Quadrant 2.

In Figure 2.1 two ambiguous categories of public and private have been replaced by four unambiguous categories. In both scholarly analysis and in shaping liberal policies in higher education, these four distinctive political economies allow the comparison and contrast between different kinds of education and research to emerge clearly, facilitating identification of the relevant political-economic dynamics while also enabling empirical observation and measurement. Figure 2.1 makes explicit the political choices associated with liberal economic provision, for example whether to produce and distribute higher education as a universal non-market good or on a competitive market basis, and if the latter whether to use state-controlled quasi-markets, the most common approach, in Quadrant 3, or fully commercial markets as in Quadrant 4. It also highlights the question of who should pay, whether the state through taxation or the individual beneficiaries. In matters defined as public in the sense of public sector, it poses the question ‘how public can we afford to be?’.

If the test of an analytical framework is the extent to which it brings the real world into view, Figure 2.1 does this: it pigeon holes four types of system and of activity and also allows different national-cultural approaches to be identified. Note however that some real-world activities are positioned on the boundaries between quadrants, or move between quadrants over time, or are located in more than one quadrant. Real-life liberal higher education systems, and individual institutions, are unlikely to be confined to one quadrant and some are active in all four. For example, much Nordic system activity falls in the social democratic Quadrant 2, combining non-market and state-organized approaches, but there are some competitive mechanisms of Quadrant 3 type. The marketized American system is strong in Quadrants 3 and 4, but mixes this with economic and political public goods in Quadrant 2, and like all systems has production in Quadrant 1. Collective student activism and home-based production of scholarship, each of which can arise in any system, are located in Quadrant 1.

Quadrant 1 (open society including the household). Quadrant 1 identifies non-market goods produced outside state control. As also in Quadrant 2, research and education are here non-rivalrous and non-excludable, Samuelson public goods. While Quadrant 1 is a private domain demarcated from both the state and relations in economic markets it is not an individualized domain separate from society. It is a relational and communicative domain. Neither of the two kinds of private/public distinction in Figure 2.1 is equivalent to the distinction between individual and society. Any relation between two or more people is 'social'. Most such social association is positioned in the private realm (Dewey, 1927, pp. 69, 186), especially in Quadrant 1.

Given that open social relations in Quadrant 1 are neither directly programmed by states nor regulated by market exchange and the commodity form, there are many different associational, cultural and political possibilities. This does not mean that all civil associations in Quadrant 1 are themselves 'open'. As noted in Bourdieu's (1988) concept of 'social capital', specific social networks, including those in universities, can operate as closures that further the interests of their members. Other forms of association, such as those of 'public spheres' (see below) are more consistently democratic.

Faculty and students pursue unpaid and unregulated educational activities in Quadrant 1 along with more formal agendas elsewhere. Open research knowledge has multiple relational consequences; it flows across all four quadrants. It is not politically public in the sense of public sector unless it is specifically publicly funded, and/or regulated, for example in research evaluation.

Quadrant 2 (social democracy). In Quadrant 1 activity can be social and collective without being politically public. In Quadrant 2, the liberal social democratic quadrant, public in the sense of state or government coincides with public as non-market. Quadrant 2 conflates non-market economic public goods with state sector public goods, shaped and largely financed by public process and government. Government manages teaching/learning on the basis of expectations of universal quality rather than market-induced stratification of quality as in Quadrants 3 and 4. In the most egalitarian version of Quadrant 2, the classical Nordic approach to liberal higher education, tuition is free, all quality is high, all degrees constitute significant value, and selectivity and university status have relatively minor roles. Quadrant 2 research is supported from general university funding rather than determined by competitive acumen. Governments may direct or influence inquiry but otherwise projects are shaped by curiosity and intellectual merit and determined through collective decision.

In non-market production in universities there is no natural limit to the volume and quality of the output of higher education except those of absolute labour time and physical resources. There are merely opportunity costs, when one action is chosen over another.

Quadrant 3 (state quasi-market). In the neoliberal policy era a growing proportion of higher education activity is moved by governments from Quadrant 2 to Quadrant 3. Liberal quasi-markets combine market goods that have properties of excludability and some rivalry, with the public regulatory functions of government. The common element across Quadrant 3 is government-driven competition. Very few quasi-markets are fully profit-driven (Marginson, 2013). Education is subject to tuition fees, policy makers emphasize the private benefits, but student places are normally partly subsidized, directly through grants to institutions or through student loans for tuition as in the UK and Australia. Research projects follow commodity-like product formats yet are government controlled and often funded. Research grant programmes may sit on the border of Quadrants 2 and 3.

In the neoliberal era the shift to quasi-markets constitutes a divergence between the economic definition of higher education as private (market-based) and the continuing public political (state-based) control of activity. There is a permanent state of tension in Quadrant 3. Being under government control, it never fully satisfies the advocates of full-blown market reform, yet the expectations created by its politically public character – its proximity to Quadrant 2 – are often undermined by the market dynamic. If higher education was fully commercialized, it would be fully produced in Quadrant 4 and private in both respects, evaporating the tension. However, this cannot be universally achieved because of the natural public good character of knowledge. Arguably, it is also impossible politically, in most liberal polities. Too much is at stake for public and government, including social equity, to let mainstream higher education become fully commercialized (Marginson, 2013).

Quadrant 4 (commercial market). In Quadrant 4 private market goods are produced, as in Quadrant 3, but these goods are now also non-state controlled. The state is not entirely absent, as commercial transactions are regulated by commercial law, just as open society in Quadrant 1 is regulated by civil and criminal law. Quadrant 4 houses commercial research and consultancy, and for-profit degrees such as international education provided in some liberal jurisdictions such as the UK, Australia, New Zealand and Canada. There is some purely commercial education also in the United States. Certain commercial activity is closely regulated or subsidized, falling on the Quadrant 3/4 border.

For example, US for-profit colleges are more than 80 per cent subsidized by federal student loans (Mettler, 2014).

Liberalism and equity. For the education function of learning/teaching/certification, the passage from Quadrant 2 to Quadrant 3 can be momentous. Here much of the contemporary politics of higher education plays out. In the Anglosphere, equity in higher education is mostly seen in terms of individual access to private economic benefits within stratified systems (see Chapter 5). However, in reality social equity also goes to system organization. This affects how socially inclusive or socially stratified individual institutions are, patterns of entry and patterns of completion by social group, and the extent to which institutions facilitate upward social mobility. Social equity in higher education is a keystone collective benefit of Quadrant 2 type that underpins the potential for many other public and private goods. All else being equal, the move from Quadrants 2 to 3 attenuates equity by enhancing institutional stratification, financial barriers and social inequality in access – unless government compensates for the unequalizing effects of starting disadvantage, and its reproduction in systemic and financial stratification (Marginson, 2018a; see Chapter 5).

In liberal systems, as in most other systems, places that offer significant positional advantage tend to be captured by students from affluent families best able to compete (Shavit et al., 2007). Economic public goods in Quadrant 2 can be captured by privileged social groups, just like economic private goods in Quadrant 3 or 4. Even in systems where tuition is free and the ethos is inclusive and egalitarian, leading families with the best cultural resources for academic competition often dominate access to high-demand programmes. It is always necessary to ask the question ‘whose public goods?’ Democratic political processes in liberal jurisdictions in Quadrant 2 should optimize the egalitarian distribution of economic public goods, but there are no guarantees.

Positional market goods are never wholly bordered private goods in the sense of having only private implications, especially high-value places that are limited relative to demand. When one person gains access to these goods and others are denied, this shapes patterns of social power and economic rewards that affect all students and families. Intense economic competition for status goods with a ceiling on distribution also generates superfluous costs, in the competition between producers (marketing, and the provision of display goods designed to signify prestige, such as visually arresting buildings) and competition between consumers (accumulating private investments for finite student places that absorb increasing social resources over time, such as private tutoring). These are negative externalities, imposing obligations on state policy to intervene in

order to modify the public bad. In short, positional goods lend themselves to politicization and state regulation. Ironically, the same relational qualities that enable high-value education to be produced as Samuelson private goods also open it to public political intervention by the state. This is one of the reasons why educational politics are endemically in disequilibrium and perpetually contested.

Summary. In liberal societies the political-economic nature of higher education and research, and particularly the public elements in their provision, is determined by whether market competition is used for the coordination of activity, and/or whether activity is located or closely controlled in the state sector. The state sector includes both legally owned state agencies and nominally private agencies that are so controlled by the state as to be equivalent to state-owned agencies. The latter include regulated and government-funded private higher education sectors or institutions in some countries. Nominally this includes the main body of UK universities, private in the legal sense though understood as public provision and regulated in a centralizing regime that belies both free university autonomy and market freedom. The question of the source of funding is not in itself determining of whether higher educational activity is public or private. High fee-charging is symptomatic of market relationships (Quadrant 3 or 4) while low fees that do not signify competition or access barriers are largely compatible with Quadrant 2. Yet though government funding is essential in Quadrant 2, it is normally present, on a variable basis, in Quadrant 3, and there can be public subsidies for commercial activity in Quadrant 4.

The neoliberal state in the Anglosphere

The state is the sole repository of the collective good. To what extent does the state exercise this function in disinterested fashion with the good of all people in mind? In particular, how much autonomy is secured by states in the Anglosphere, in relation to class-based interests and capitalist logics? The short answer is 'not much'. This is attested by theorists of both left and right. In *The Communist Manifesto* Marx and Engels (1848/2014) define the state as the 'committee for managing the common affairs of the whole bourgeoisie'. For James Buchanan and other public choice theorists a common public good that transcends individual preferences is impossible. As they see it, individuals use politics to seek forms of social organization and justice that upheld their personal interests. Political leaders might claim accountability to persons or causes other than themselves, but this is a fiction. Politics is just another market. Group decisions are the sum

of individual decisions combined through a decision-making rule (Buchanan and Tullock, 1962).

Not all scholars agree. In *The Public and Its Problems* (1927) John Dewey argues that while some state officials seek power or rewards, not all people in public life are driven by individual self-interest, as they are in economic markets (pp. 15, 21 and 30). Even so, honest state officials may not exercise full control over the political agenda, which sets the boundaries of the possible (Lukes, 2021).

There have been particular historical moments when Anglo-American states have secured substantial autonomy to act in their own right, operating across different class forces, such as Roosevelt's New Deal policies in the 1930s. The scope for such autonomy depends on the configuration of forces, the capabilities of the state and its leaders, and conditions and timing. As is further discussed in Chapter 6, in the neoliberal era the state in the Anglosphere does not want to explore the full potentials of autonomy from class interests. The primary rationale of the neoliberal state is maximization of capital accumulation. All branches of government, including policy on higher education and research, become fashioned with the interests of capital in mind. The nesting of the state in the reproduction and augmentation of capital pulls higher education and research towards Quadrant 3 where the state and market meet. The master public role of higher education is seen as its contribution to profitability, industry innovation and economic growth – though neoliberal government, more than industry, shapes economic utility in education (Geiger and Sa, 2009, p. 209).

In the centralized systems of government in UK, Australia and New Zealand, the nexus between the state and capitalist economy is managed by the central financial agencies of government, Treasury and the central bank. This is known as the Westminster model. Treasury defines and regulates the neoliberal policy agenda. Historically, it has been the arbiter of Westminster higher education policy (e.g. for the UK see Shattock and Horvath, 2020).

Weaknesses in Samuelson

Despite its functionality for neoliberal states and for capital the Samuelson dualism exhibits several weaknesses when applied to policy in higher education. First, as noted, market failure is a necessary but not sufficient basis for fixing public spending on higher education and research. The distinction between government-provided and market-provided goods is determined not only by the potential for private enterprise but by the whole policy context, by social arrangements and politics. Hence in the neoliberal Quadrant 3, states often subsidize private institutions

in education markets so that marketized production will be economically and/or socially sufficient, for example in industry training. The provision of school vouchers, which facilitates universal markets in schooling, extends beyond the finance minimally necessary to guarantee universal participation, to include all middle-class families that could finance their participation privately. For these families are also voters in countries with electoral polities who would be unlikely to accept exclusion from voucher financing. The UK state underpins market consumption by higher education students by carrying the cost of unpaid student loan debt: otherwise social tolerance of the market model would fracture.

A second problem with the Samuelson approach is the categorical assumption of zero-sum, the idea that if a good is not public then by definition it is private, and vice versa. Often public and private goods are not alternatives but additive. Medical doctors achieve augmented individual earnings while contributing to the public welfare. With each new wave of medical graduates the public and private goods expand together. Basic research in universities, together with connections to commercial and non-profit organizations, directly and indirectly generates both public and private goods in complex feedback loops (Hughes and Kitson, 2012). The interrelation between private and public outcomes makes it difficult to devise a public/private division of costs that is not arbitrary. Funding arrangements in Quadrant 3, in contrast with the grounded and defensible full public funding in Quadrant 2 or full commercial funding in Quadrant 4, are inherently politicized and unstable.

A third and the most fundamental problem is that Samuelson's definition cannot comprehend the larger collective goods, which tend to fall outside economics altogether, being difficult to border, observe, measure and value in terms of shadow prices: for example, the contribution of higher education to knowledge, or to lifting cultural and scientific literacy, or to technological uptake across the population, or to social tolerance and political connectedness. Neoliberal governments have little appetite for defining, monitoring, measuring (where that is possible) and regulating such jointly consumed collective outcomes. Neoliberal economists mostly downplay both the scope for collective goods and market failure in their provision, or assume without evidence that private investment will generate the necessary collective goods as spillovers. In a Samuelson universe collective outcomes are chronically under-recognized, under-funded and under-produced.

Knowledge in Samuelson's terms is an economic public good, one that is intrinsically collective as well as individual. Knowledge is at the core of all learning/teaching, scholarship and research. Yet knowledge is largely invisible in Samuelson. Likewise, higher education institutions have multiple social

relational connections, but for Samuelson these are visible only when manifest in individualized pecuniary benefits.

Many collective outcomes associated with higher education connect to more inclusive social relations that are part of liberal tradition and 'public' in a different sense to the usage in liberal economics. Some such activities are located in Quadrant 1 that, being neither state nor market, is largely unrecognized in neoliberal economic policy on higher education. Such activities are now considered.

Filling the gap: Collective civil publics

Neoliberal government focuses on public aspects of higher education that are located at the intersection between the state and the market economy. However, liberal societies also include extensive civil institutions, activities and networks constituting other kinds of 'public', including the universal electorate, founded in a shared community of equivalent citizens. As noted, the Anglosphere embeds an ideological link between liberal economic freedom and political democracy (Lukes, 1973, p. 26). In liberal society, conceived as a miscellany of sovereign individuals, there are limits on collective sociability. Societies in the Anglosphere typically join deeply only in the face of extreme challenges, such as war; and sometimes not even then, as the Covid-19 pandemic showed. Nevertheless, the collective public in civil society has a number of informal resonances in higher education.

It is striking how neoliberal state policy on higher education, especially funding, is narrower in this respect than liberal society as a whole. Institutional practices that address the citizenry are unrecognized and unfunded. The main exception is policy on social equity in access to higher education, which breaks beyond market value to call up a social democratic notion of shared citizen rights – albeit one that has become diminished to individual access to Samuelson private goods, no longer challenging the class-based structures that generate unequal outcomes (for more discussion see Chapter 5).

The inclusive-communicative 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 can be observed empirically. That is 'the public' as a collective noun, the public as a single networked body of people, plus adjectival forms such as 'public opinion' and 'public media'. This kind of public intersects discursively with the

democratic electorate of universal suffrage and calls up a participatory politics of media-based discussion of public affairs, political parties, town hall meetings and recurring election 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 recent users of the Internet comprised 92 per cent of the national population (Office for National Statistics, 2024), and in 2024 worldwide internet penetration was 68 per cent (World Bank, 2025).

The relation between the state as public, and the inclusive-communicative public, varies by country and form of communication. It is changing in the screen-based era. In Western Europe and the Anglosphere the public as electorate is classically auspiced by the state, though public opinion sits in civil society. Yet civil society, broadly defined, now includes the 'quasi-publics' constituted by platform capitalism, the communicative networks of Google, Facebook, X and others, unambiguously grounded in the private sector and sitting between Quadrants 1 and 4. A communications company in itself is not a state. Its social ties are weaker, it lacks coercive powers, it has less direct control over and less obligation to its networks and members. Nevertheless, it harbours a wide-ranging persuasive capacity that can augment states. Klein (2020) discusses cooperation between states and communication platforms during the Covid-19 pandemic; and the owner of X, Elon Musk, temporarily entered the Trump administration in the United States in late 2024. In *How Democracy Ends* (2018) David Runciman suggests that social media displaces older forms of public political participation because social media talk is more hyper-engaged, expressive and attractive. Hence communicative 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 does not compel attention. Institutions find it more difficult than states to address populations. Higher education stratifies the public between those who access degrees and those who do not. Its most inclusive public form is in university towns where the institution can be the largest local organization. Yet mass higher education is expected to be broadly inclusive (Cantwell et al., 2018); and the goal of widening participation on the basis of equity in admission reflects widely held beliefs that higher education should provide an inclusive framework of opportunity, at least potentially tending towards universality. Most states support measures to encourage participation, targeting support for under-represented social groups with varying levels of vigour. Here the neoliberal

policy framework is modified by the inclusive public forms, though access to elite institutions is more fraught and rarely modified by policy interventions (equity as a public good in the UK is discussed further in Chapter 5).

Public spheres

A more specific and concentrated kind of inclusive-communicative public is constituted by public spheres. These are found in the open society Quadrant 1 while connecting to the state in Quadrants 2 and 3. Habermas (1989) identifies a 'public sphere' in late-seventeenth-century London with its salons, coffee houses and broadsheets that together constituted public opinion and provided a critical reflexivity for the government of the day. Building on Habermas, Calhoun (1992) finds that universities operate in analogous fashion as semi-independent adjuncts of government, providing constructive criticism and strategic options, and expert information that helps state and public to reach considered opinions. Pusser (2006) models the university as a zone of reasoned argument and contending values, noting that US higher education has been a medium for successive political and socio-cultural transformations, such as the 1960s civil rights movement.² Because of its capacity to form self-altering agents and engender critical intellectual reflexivities (Castoriadis, 1987, p. 372), and the way it facilitates movement across boundaries, at times higher education has incubated advanced democratic forms.

Habermas's public sphere is communication based. Some theorists use the term 'public' or the 'public sphere' more loosely for a larger network of overlapping public and private organizations that constitute a common communicative democratic space in which public political matters are discussed (e.g. Fraser, 1990; Castells, 2000; Drache, 2010). Higher education and research nurture many such networked communities, which in the case of activities focused on research and scholarship, routinely cross-national borders.

Conclusions

This chapter has reviewed the different understandings and practices of 'public' and 'public good' in liberal political cultures in the Anglosphere, and their

² Higher education as a public sphere has a part parallel in the political culture of China where the leading national universities, operating *inside* the party-state, though not in the open public realm, constitute a space connected to power enabling frank criticism, advice and formulation of alternatives (Zha, 2011). Peking University was also the primary starting point for most open political movements in twentieth-century China, including Tiananmen in 1989.

possibilities and limits for the collective potentials of higher education and research. In the neoliberal period the core Anglo-American approach to policy is constituted by the Samuelson (1954) combination of commercial markets with residual state action. Larger practices of public good, including socially inclusive and democratic notions of 'public' in the liberal tradition, are evaded. In the policy mainstream just two collective social goals are widely maintained, albeit variable in application: the contribution of higher education to shared knowledge through research (though partly funded by international student fees in UK and Australia), and the contribution of higher education to social equity through opportunities for individuals. Other public contributions are often seen as incidental spillovers from the provision of benefits for graduates, not as policy objectives; part of higher education's case for support, perhaps, but its own responsibility. This reduces the fiscal burdens of government but also reduces the scope for public agency and enhances the risks of under- or non-provision of public goods.

With the public role of higher education largely devolved downwards from government to institution, some universities maintain surprisingly strong public missions. The University of California (UC) campuses at Berkeley and Los Angeles enrol high proportions of students from low-income families (Dirks, 2015). However, the UC approach to social equity rests on system-level coordination by the UC President's office. No solely individual elite Anglo-American university produces public good on this scale. They cannot substitute for states or systems. They must look to their own sustainability, and cannot reorder other institutions to redistribute overall outcomes and enhance joint benefits. They are less publicly transparent than states and not joined to communities via democratic mechanisms. The state and its policy are unavoidably central to public good in higher education. Even the inclusive-communicative publics in civil society are affected by the state. The question then is, what are the limits and possibilities of the higher educational state in liberal capitalist societies?

* * * * *

In the Anglosphere university leaders now pilot their corporatized institutions without the same level of state support that leaders receive in social democratic settings, while, as noted, taking responsibility for both collective and individualized outcomes, including the provision of fair individual opportunities and humanist social outcomes, that in other political cultural settings are seen as functions of the state. As this suggests, while higher education is by no means perfect as a social citizen, the ultimate limitation of collective production in this

sector lies not in the deficiencies of higher education itself but in the tattered public good role of the state in ultra-individualistic liberal societies.

Chapter 3 takes the discussion of public good and public/private in the Anglosphere into the higher education system in one country, England. The empirical interviews reported in the chapter show that the critique of neoliberal approaches to public good that has been outlined in Chapter 2 is widely shared in England, even among some in government itself. It also shows the frustration engendered by the neoliberal policy straight-jacket, because market imperatives dominate day-to-day thinking within the sector. Later chapters will expand on aspects of the public good and the downsides of the neoliberal policy framework. Chapters 4 and 5 consider the relation between higher education, work, policy and institutional practices, and Chapter 5 also looks at social equality and inequality in higher education, now situated within the neoliberal framing of public goods as solely individual properties. Chapter 6 will return to the larger overarching questions about public good approaches in Anglo-American higher education.

Sovereign Individualism in Higher Education in England

Socialism, as long as it attacks the existing individualism, is easily triumphant; its weakness hitherto is in what it proposes to substitute.

~ John Stuart Mill, 'Newman's Political Economy', 1851,
in J.S. Mill, *Collected Works, Volume 5: Essays on Economy
and Society Part II*, 1967, University of Toronto Press/Routledge

The conceptual review in Chapter 2 explained how neoliberal policies in the Anglosphere, driven by the nexus between the state and economic capital, interpret the public good of higher education as residual state action in support of the market economy, and how this gravely limits the potentials of higher education, especially in the production of collective social outcomes in Quadrants 1 and 2 in Figure 2.1. Chapter 3 explores this empirically. It draws on interview-based research with practitioners and policy professionals in higher education in England in the UK, in relation to the public good and the public/private distinction in higher education. In these interviews, including those in government, higher education is associated with multiple contributions to society and many interviewees are concerned about the narrow focus on individualized economic values, including the downside for educational equity, a principal public good (topics further discussed in Chapters 4 and 5). However, the terms in which policy has been set muddy the waters. Market pressures are omnipresent, and interviewees find it difficult to explain the collective good that in JS Mill's terms they 'proposed to substitute' for neoliberal practices.

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Lili Yang contributed to an earlier version of this chapter through interviews, part of the data analysis and critical review of the manuscript.

Introduction: The missing public good

By equating the public good in higher education with its contribution to GDP and measuring that by aggregating the individualized pecuniary goods associated with graduates, the neoliberal framework empties out both the broader contribution of higher education to individual student self-formation (Marginson, 2024a) and the many collective contributions of higher education to society. Yet there is continuing support for larger ideas of public good.

This chapter reports on a study of higher education and public good in the nation of England within the UK. The overarching research question was:

What does higher education in England contribute to public good, according to practitioners?

The research consisted of twenty-four semi-structured interviews, in two research-intensive universities with contrasting missions (thirteen interviews all told), and with policy professionals (eleven interviews). The latter group included people working in government, and in national organizations focused on higher education policy, and academic experts on higher education in the UK. Prior to the interviews the chapter tracks the evolution of official thinking about higher education and public good in selected policy-related public documents in the UK and England from 1963 to 2019.

The UK is a conglomerate nation, the outcome of a thousand years of English colonization of Wales, Scotland and Ireland. In the twentieth century following partial devolution¹ there are four higher education systems with differing policies (Callender, 2023). England has 84.3 per cent of the UK population. In Scotland, where domestic students pay no tuition fees, and in Wales where relations between institutions are primarily organized as systemic cooperation not competition, there is stronger government commitment to the public good role than in England. The interviews here pertain solely to England, where all but one of the interviewees worked. The 'hyper-commodified' English higher education (Boliver and Promenzio, 2024) gives it special significance in issues of public good. Of the world's higher education England's policy most completely realizes the neoliberal ideal, in which neo-classical economic ideas closely shape policy

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.

(Scott, 2021), freedom is grounded in economic market exchange, and education is seen in solely individualized terms.

Chapter 2 discussed how the multiple meanings of 'public' in the Anglosphere include (1) '*the* public good' as a normative condition of universal welfare, well-being or beneficence; (2) 'public goods' as half of an economic dualism with private goods (Samuelson, 1954); (3) 'public' meaning state or government, as half of a dualism between the 'public sector' and the private realm; and (4) public as an inclusive communicative whole population, as in 'public opinion' or 'the public sphere'. The first three meanings had numerous, though not always coherent or consistent, empirical resonances in this chapter's interviews. The inclusive-communicative idea arose mostly in relation to policy on access.

In the interviews the public good role of higher education normally referred to non-market activity and mostly excluded pecuniary benefits for single individuals such as the status and earnings associated with graduation, though a minority of interviewees saw the individualized pecuniary benefits as contained within the shared public good. Hence broadly speaking most interviewees equated public goods with economic public goods as in (2) above. However, their idea of the non-market role was larger than Samuelson's, being touched by social democratic welfare state conceptions and connecting to the normative public good as in (1). They also equated these public good-related activities with government activity and funding, as in (3). For most interviewees public goods included both non-pecuniary benefits for individuals, like personal growth or formation as citizens, and collective benefits like the effects of higher education in technological literacy, public health, local cultural activities, or peaceful and tolerant society. Specific interviewees did not necessarily have all of these interpretations in mind. A small minority, all with economic training, held to the more limited neoliberal idea of public goods.

The chapter begins with remarks on England's political economy and higher education and then tracks the arc of public good in the milestone reports on higher education by Robbins (1963), Dearing (1997) and Browne (2010). The Augar (2019) report, a coherent document but never fully implemented and of lesser historical importance, brings the account closer to the time of writing. This section is followed by a review of relevant scholarly literature, and then insights from the 24 semi-structured interviews, followed by discussion. For reasons of space much detail is omitted, including the lesser reports between the milestones, the shape of institutional stratification (Boliver, 2015), and regional variations in England which shape patterns of social use of higher education,

detail of the regulatory machinery, and core issues and debates which have animated successive policy discussions.

England and higher education

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

Treasury presides over an economy moderately wealthy and highly unequal. In 2021 the UK's 67.0 million people had a GDP per capita of \$46,510, compared to \$51,204 in Germany (World Bank, 2025). Of the forty-one European NUTS 2 regions² in the UK in 2017, ten regions had per capita incomes below 80 per cent of the EU average, while West London with 626 per cent of the EU average was much the richest region in Europe (EU, 2023).

In 2022–3 there were 2.937 million enrolled students in 285 registered higher education institutions (UUK, 2024), 2.423 million in England. English institutions received £44.038 billion in income (HESA, 2024). The small elite universities prior to the Second World War were largely autonomous but massification and the expansion of public spending after 1960 were correlated with growing central control. While English higher education connects to localities it is decisively shaped by central economic policy and national regulation. In *The Governance of British Higher Education*, Shattock and Horvath (2020) identify the state as the main driver of change in the sector, not the institutions (p. 153), though Westminster has faltered in its 'duty of care', amid declining resources and

² NUTS is from the French term for statistical regions used by the EU: Nomenclature des Unites Territoriales Statistiques. NUTS 2 regions are about twice the size of English counties.

instability (p. 154). In *Universities and Regions* (Shattock and Horvath, 2023) the same authors call for partial decentralization of higher education and regional cooperation with local government, industry and further education.

Like the society higher education was (and is) highly stratified. UK researchers were strong in global science in 2020, with 6.3 per cent of global publications and 10.5 per cent of citations (UUK, 2023); England had three of the top fifteen universities in high citation papers (Leiden University, 2025); the global status of Oxford and Cambridge is equivalent to the leading US universities such as Harvard, Stanford and MIT. However, the intensity of educational participation and research drops sharply in the poorer regions.

Annual domestic tuition fees were fixed at £9,000 per full-time student in 2012, and raised to £9,250 in 2017 and then to £9,385 in 2024. This was high in international terms (OECD, 2024). Uniquely in the world's publicly nested universities, student fees were the sole source of funding for most first-degree student places. Except for a minority of places in STEM subjects there was no state funding, meaning that, students in England financed the public goods associated with their education as well as the private goods. It was electorally difficult for governments to increase the maximum level of tuition and between 2017 and 2024 it lost 30 per cent of its value in real terms. This decline in domestic student income made institutions highly and increasingly dependent on the uncapped fees paid by international students which averaged £22,000 per full-time student in early 2024 (British Council, 2024). In 2022–23, 23.7 per cent of students in England were non-EU international students and they contributed 21.1 per cent of institutional income (HESA, 2024), subsidizing domestic teaching, infrastructure, services and research. However, in 2023 the government constrained international student visas and international student applications fell.

The public good in policy reports 1963–2019

Through all UK policy regimes, from the welfare state from 1945 to 1975 to the neoliberal turbo-charged financial capitalism of the 1980s onwards, the educational, social and economic weight of higher education has grown, albeit in fits and starts. At the same time, the shaping discourses and rationales for higher education have undergone marked changes. The Gross Tertiary Enrolment Ratio moved from 19 per cent in 1980 to 55 per cent in 1998 (World Bank, 2025). Full international student fees had begun in 1979. Institutions then moved from no tuition charges for domestic students in 1997 to the highest

tuition in publicly nested institutions in the world in 2012 and after, while at the same time the participation of full-time students continued to grow. This change can be tracked by comparing the approach to public good in higher education in four successive policy reports in 1963, 1997, 2010 and 2019.

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

The Robbins report (1963)

According to Scott the Robbins (1963) report 'occupies an iconic place in the history of higher education in the UK' (Scott, 2021, p. 40). It established the idea of a higher education system and normalized the principle that all qualified students who aspired to higher education should be able to enter, which is still routinely cited. The report's impact rested partly on its prose quality and capacity to inspire. Beneath its largely practical discussion lay a vision of higher education without limit, like Virgil's Rome, far exceeding an economic rationale grounded in scarcity and productivity. Its broad claim was summarized in the final sentence: 'it [higher education] is an essential condition for the realisation in the modern age of the ideals of a free and democratic society' (Robbins, 1963, p. 267).

Robbins did not see the public and private outcomes of higher education as zero-sum. The report was issued when higher education was 90 per cent publicly funded. As he saw it, within higher education as a public good individuals secured both pecuniary and non-pecuniary gains and society benefitted from both. However, as time went on and the growth rate of enrolments exceeded the growth rate of GDP, the cost of expansion loomed larger in the mind of Treasury (Shattock, 2012, p. 5). In 1979 full-cost international student fees were announced. It became a momentous decision but the early impact on incomes was modest.

The Dearing report (1997)

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

components of a global knowledge economy (Dale, 2005). Treasury's first mode of managing the cost of expansion was under-funding. Public funding per student declined by more than 42 per cent between 1976–77 and 1995–96 (Shattock, 2012, p. 131). The Vice-Chancellors campaigned for 'top-up' student fees to supplement government monies (p. 5). As with the Robbins committee, a large part of the Dearing committee was from higher education itself. This was not a Treasury-dominated process: the committee saw the world in terms of a knowledge society imaginary rather than the knowledge economy. The Dearing process overlapped with a transition from Conservative to Labour government, and the Dearing committee had freedom to move in whatever direction it chose. In the outcome it moved in more than one direction, positioning a neoliberal case for tuition fees within a universalist and social democratic vision.

The report located higher education in a multi-strand engagement with government, society and economy. The purposes of higher education were to enable the development of persons, to expand knowledge, 'to serve the needs' of the economy, and 'to play a major role in shaping a democratic, civilised, inclusive society'. Higher education should 'enable society to make progress through an understanding of itself and its world' (Dearing, 1997, p. 72). These enlarging statements secured for the Dearing Committee the immediate and long-term support of the higher education sector. However, the report also proposed the introduction into the free English system of tuition fees financed by income-contingent student loans, to be repaid from later earnings after leaving higher education, pleasing the Vice-Chancellors and Treasury but displeasing many others. To justify fees the Dearing committee framed a Treasury-style narrative that defined higher education as economic rather than social in character, contradicting other parts of the report. The outcomes of higher education were presented as being primarily individualized:

There is overwhelming evidence that those with higher education qualifications are the main beneficiaries from higher education in the form of improved employment prospects and pay ... graduates in employment should make a greater contribution to the costs of higher education in the future. While we believe the economy as a whole, and those who employ graduates, are also substantial beneficiaries, even though these benefits have proved elusive to quantify, the greatest benefit accrues to graduates themselves. (Dearing, 1997, pp. 288–9)

For the first time in English policy the private benefits were correlated with private financing. In 1998 the newly elected Labour government introduced

a £1,000 fee, without Dearing's income-contingent student loan-repayment mechanism. Later, in 2005, Labour hiked the fee to £3,000 and applied the income-contingent loans scheme. This did not settle the problem of financing the cost of expansion; the government was committed to lifting the participation rate to 50 per cent; and in 2009 it established a new inquiry into higher education fees and funding. This eventually reported after a Conservative Party-led Coalition government had been elected.

The Browne report (2010)

The Browne committee proposed the largest transformation since Robbins. It modelled higher education in England wholly as an economic quasi-market, with full price tuition fees supported by income-contingent loans. Like Dearing the Browne committee initially couched the role of higher education in broad social and cultural terms (Browne, 2010, p. 14). Yet that broad role was not further defined, and the report immediately followed this passage with a discussion of the pecuniary and personal-developmental benefits for individuals (p. 14), joined to economic calculations of the value of individual pecuniary benefits (p. 15).

The expectation of the Browne report was that any and every broad-based outcome of higher education would be financed by individualized tuition. 'With public resources now limited, new investment will have to come from those who directly benefit from higher education' (Browne, 2010, p. 25). This logic meant that student consumers would have a vested interest in minimizing the cost of those outcomes of higher education of no direct value to them as individuals, including basic research and other collective benefits.

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

In 2018 the government developed fuller market-style regulation to match the fee structure. It abolished the funding council that sat between the minister and institutions, creating an Office for Students (OFS) with 'powers to intervene on a risk-based basis' in institutions 'with the objective of promoting competition and choice and looking after the student interest' (Augar, 2019, p. 63). This paralleled

England's organization of privatized power, water and rail. Just prior to this in 2017 the government created a Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) that calibrated individual institutional performance, using comparative graduate salaries and student satisfaction surveys. This focused attention on the private pecuniary benefits of higher education while positioning students solely as consumers. Successive ministers directly instructed the OFS. The government also required universities to pursue limited collective outcomes in four areas. The Research Excellence Framework (REF) incentivized research with social 'impact', while also functioning as a mode of distribution of and accountability for research funding. The Knowledge Exchange Framework (KEF) focused institutions on the needs of social and economic partners. In relation to education, under Widening Participation policy institutions were required to enhance student participation from under-enrolled social groups and regions. Institutions were also expected to enhance graduates' employment skills, benefitting the economy as well as individual graduates. These four domains supplemented the market in private educational services, rather than constituting an alternative public good-oriented system.

In the passage from Robbins and Dearing to Browne policy shifted from planning and funding to regulation, and from arms-length funding to reduced public investment tied to more direct ministerial control. It largely emptied out official recognition of the public good role of higher education. Institutions, not government, were now responsible for both the individual and collective benefits of higher education. Government saw itself in terms of the neoliberal trope of 'steering not rowing'. It generated comparative graduate salary data nominally intended to inform the student-as-consumer and shape provision and efficiency, while normalizing the neoliberal understanding of outcomes as private pecuniary goods.

The Augar report (2019)

In the 2017 election campaign the Labour Party promised to abolish tuition fees and almost took power on a wave of youth support. This prompted the elected Conservative government to establish another review of fees and funding, not to replace the market system but to secure a politically saleable fee reduction. The Augar Committee recommended a fee reduction from £9,250 to £7,500 and a compensating increase in direct grants from government to institutions: that is, a modest return to mixed public and private funding. This was not implemented. However, the report provided an interesting indicator of thinking

on public good. Like the Browne Committee, the Augar Committee focused on ‘value for money’ in a system that ‘incentivises choice and competition’ (Augar, 2019, p. 65). ‘Value’ was defined unequivocally in terms of individual pecuniary benefits. Non-pecuniary benefits for persons, and collective benefits for society, were wholly omitted from calculations. Just one separately boxed paragraph in the report was a glimpse of something larger:

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

That was as far as it went. The Augar Committee knew higher education generated public good and its ‘wider value’ should be recognized but had no idea how to do it. The Augar report’s irresolution showed that mainstream English policy no longer had tools for imagining, investigating or enhancing the public good role of higher education. Even so, despite the dominance of Treasury thinking, there was still a residual expectation in the public mind that universities were more than private businesses selling a service: they had a larger public role and were a matter of public interest. If they were now positioned in Quadrant 3, there were still some expectations of Quadrant 2 and they were not Quadrant 4. They ‘remained semi-detached private institutions, half-inside and half-outside the public domain’ (Scott, 2021, p. 11).

Prior research on public good issues

Since Robbins there has been continuous discussion and debate about UK and English policy on the public good role of higher education. One might assume that the public good role has triggered much research. However, there has been less scholarly study than policy commentary and polemic; and scholarly emphasis has fallen not on the public good role per se but on issues related to it, like whether students should pay tuition fees, whether or not they are consumers, and university autonomy. Work is done by individual universities on their local

public good role, but most of this is essentially marketing in report format. The comprehensive collective benefits of higher education have not been rigorously researched.

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

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

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

The historical reviews of policy by Shattock (2012) and Scott (2021) discuss how marketization fostered greater inequalities between universities,

the partial evacuation of government responsibility for higher education outcomes, and the concurrent assertion of closer government control, but do not directly address the public good role in terms of collective goods. If marketization is eroding the public remit of institutions, it is unclear what is left in the public remit. In Brown (2011), a trenchant critique of the neoliberal market model, the brief references to 'public good' and 'public goods' understand those terms in Samuelson's (1954) market-oriented sense. There are connections to collective outcomes of higher education in specific literatures such as work on research and knowledge, on social inequalities in participation in higher education, and on the contribution of universities to cities and regions (e.g. Goddard et al., 2016), but these studies do not systematically define, explore, theorize or measure higher education's contributions to collective public good.

The present chapter reports on the first research study directly focused on attitudes to the role of higher education in England in relation to public good. The inclusion of policy professionals, including past and present policy makers/regulators, adds to its significance.

Interviews in institutions and with policy professionals

The study in England was one of ten country studies of higher education and public good, using a common framework (for more details, see Brewis and Marginson, 2025).

Conduct of the interviews

The Appendix to this book, located after Chapter 11, lists the twenty-four interviewees. In 2017, semi-structured interviews U-1 to U-13 were conducted in university 1, a London-based global research institution (six interviews, U-1 to U-6), and university 2, a provincial research university (seven interviews, U-7 to U-13) with university leaders, middle manager-leaders and professors. In 2021 there were eleven interviews P-1 to P-11 with higher education policy professionals: people working as government regulators (two interviews), leading national organizations focused on higher education policy (five interviews), two of whom previously worked as policy makers, and academic experts on higher education (four interviews).

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

All interviews were audio recorded and professionally transcribed. The research was governed by ethics regulation at University College London (U-1 to U-13) and the University of Oxford (P-1 to P-11). Interview data were coded and analysed on an inductive basis, within three broad deductive categories based on the research questions:

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

Limitations

A larger and more diverse set of universities, and more policy professionals, including officials from Treasury and the Cabinet Office, leaders of UK research agencies and further academic experts, would have strengthened the study. Considerations of anonymity have limited the extent to which responses from different groups of interviewees are compared.

Findings from the interviews

Understandings of public good

There was no single understanding among the English interviewees of the 'public good', or 'public goods' as distinct from 'private goods'. All the Anglo-American meanings of 'public' discussed in Chapter 2 entered the interviews and there were significant ambiguities, tensions and outright contradictions in and between the responses.

However, very few answers coincided with the attenuated perspectives on the unfinanced public good in Browne (2010). Over half the interviewees, including

most policy professionals, developed an expansive domain of public action or relations, tending towards the normative and universalizing definition (1) of 'public' that of *the* public good:

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

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

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

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

U-2, P-1, P-7, P-8 and P-9 were also forthcoming on this. One senior university manager equated public good with 'relational goods' that contributed to 'peace, prosperity and security' (U-2). A current policy maker/regulator referred to 'the territory of connections ... the ecosystem between universities and public services, and industries and communities' (P-1). The public good was 'matters beneficial to citizens in the broadest sense' (P-8). A professor of political economy referred to the communicative 'public domain' definition (4) of 'public' as outlined above, that included universities, the media and political system, 'where we reflect, as a society, on the rules that we wish to govern ourselves with' (U-4).

Other interviewees focused on the state, definition (3) of 'public': 'public good ... that's what governments are there for'. This rendered the public good 'a democratic principle' (P-9), one 'subject to public debate about what is in the public interest' (P-7). Some explicitly associated the public good with the 'public sector'. A senior university manager-leader engaged in medical services was emphatic that 'public' meaning public sector institutions like universities and the NHS could be efficient, productive and innovative (U-3).

Though two economically trained interviewees from the universities expressed policy views close to those of the Treasury, other economically trained interviewees had views similar to the non-economically trained interviewees. Some drew on economic concepts like externalities (U-4) and market failure (P-1) to explain the state's role in public good, but there was almost universal resistance to the either/or notion of zero-sum public and private outcomes, a matter on which there was a specific question in the interviews. 'Very often public goods and private goods go hand in hand with one another' (P-4, also U-1):

Roles of government in higher education

The four policy makers/regulators, none of whom were economists, differed from other interviewees in relation to the role of government though not on other issues. They defined the government's public remit in crisp and spare terms: the framing of norms and policy expectations, regulation as a proxy on behalf of taxpayers and students (P-1), research and the subsidization of unpaid student debt. Government was no longer a planner (P-2). However, because institutions were driven by market competition and pursued their own interests such as their league table position, they could not be trusted and government surveillance was essential (regulator P-1, and also national organization leader P-7).

For the most part interviewees from the national organizations and universities had a wider and less bordered vision of the role of government, including its contribution to public good in higher education. Most interviewees explicitly stated that government should provide funding, and social access. P-5 argued that it should provide an enabling public discourse: 'Government should provide an environment in which universities can thrive'. Institutions, not the state, were responsible for the contents of teaching and research, student selection, graduate attributes and resource management. 'Government should be hands off in the details but hands on when it comes to the overarching purposes' (P-4).

Nevertheless, some in the universities (e.g. U-13) saw UK regulation as now allowing government to intervene as it saw fit, for example in graduate attributes or financial management. The old norms, associated with funding, planning and convenorship by the then intermediary body, the Higher Education Funding Council of England (HEFCE), had combined institutional autonomy with government stewardship (P-5, P-7 and U-2). Higher education had been 'co-regulated' by HEFCE and institutions (P-7). These norms had wholly collapsed. Central government regulated at will and was no longer a steward (U-1, U-9, P-8).

There seems to be a withdrawal from straightforward commitment to funding universities, and simultaneously an increasingly interventionist approach to university, all these monitoring mechanisms, REF, TEF, KEF ...

(U-1, middle-level leader, university 1, literature)

Others were concerned about the narrowing effects of instruments like the TEF, REF and KEF, though REF and KEF were also seen as valid proxies for public good outcomes (e.g. U-7).

Institutional autonomy. All interviewees, including the policy makers/regulators, agreed that 'the more autonomy the better ... universities in the English tradition are highly autonomous' (former policy maker, P-3):

Our universities are not government entities, they're not arms' length bodies, academics are not civil servants in the way they are in very many systems. [Keeping] the relationship between the government and sector at a distance, is quite important.

(P-6, senior leader, national organization)

However, it was unclear whether the public good lay in independence from government or greater accountability. Whereas the policy makers blandly and realistically described relations with institutions as regulated autonomy, some university people distanced themselves from the state in passionate and absolute terms. 'It's really important that universities maintain the whole principle of independence and [are not] interfered with' (U-3). Yet as noted, other interviewees knew that independence was suborned in practice. The disjunction between the universalizing principle and the contrary reality meant that it was impossible to see where to draw a viable defensive line. Boundary fuzziness is endemic to a state-regulated liberal division of labour in governance. 'There's a kind of balance between regulation and freedom. But by and large I don't want governments interfering' (U-13).

Public and private funding. Unlike the benefits of higher education, the costs of higher education did entail a zero-sum choice. Yet the financing divide between public/private was arbitrary. What share was right and just? 70 per cent private? 50 per cent? 30 per cent? Once public and private outputs were seen as positive-sum, there was no longer a basis for splitting costs. When some interviewees discussed the cost split, they floundered.

There's no doubt that on average that university education provides a significant private return to students, but it's hugely heterogeneous. ... higher education provides private returns but also provides huge social returns.

(P-11, academic expert, economics and education)

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

(P-5, senior leader, national organization)

Two economics professors were equally unresolved (U-4 and U-9). Yet, and despite the near-universal rejection of a zero-sum dualism between public

and private goods, interviewees often fell back on Samuelson's formula as the default for calculating the public/private split of costs. The problem there was how to estimate the economic value of the public good outcomes. Subsidized student loans added to the confusion: 'the extent to which they'll be repaid by individuals ... or written off by the state is – yeah – murky' [Laughs] (U-11). No interviewee took the way out of the problem: to declare financing to be a fiscal-political decision separable from the nature and outcomes of higher education.

Public good in higher education and knowledge

Interviewees from all sectors almost unanimously saw the benefits of higher education as being both private and public, and both individual and collective. Just one, a university economist, adopted the Treasury view that education provided solely private goods while research generated public goods (U-4). Others expanded on collective contributions such as shared literacy, inclusive relations, communications, knowledge, policy advice for government, educational opportunity and social mobility. Several interviewees from the universities conceived higher education as multiple outcomes in much the same terms as Dearing (1997). Interviewees from regional university 2 were more focused on local outreach and the regional mission, than were those from the London-based global university.

There was shared recognition, including among most of the policy makers/regulators, that attention had tipped too far to the private side. One economist noted the private returns associated with degrees were easy to compute 'but if you focus the debate on things that you can put a pecuniary number on', the 'social returns', the large public good aspect, are missed (P-11). However, many struggled for precision when discussing the public good role of the sector.

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

(P-5, senior leader, national organization)

Education. When discussing the education function, several university interviewees joined the formative effects of individual learning to social formation and the collective good, as in the German Bildung tradition (Kivela,

2012), Dewey (1916) and others. Here the individualized outcomes of higher education were seen as broader than the private pecuniary benefits. Higher education could transform students.

... from someone who feels like they have no agency in their life, or they have very few choices, into someone with lots of agency and lots of choices. That is very powerful.

(P-7, senior leader, national organization)

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

(U-1, middle-level manager-leader, university 1, literature)

Institutions formed students as capable, socialized, autonomous persons and they took this into the world. Such graduates were 'one of our public goods' (U-1). Higher education 'contributes to a society that is a thoughtful one, that is a reflective one, that values multiplicity of perspectives, that values international perspectives' (U-1, also U-2, U-6, P-1). Almost half the interviewees criticized the extent of focus on the private pecuniary benefits in the full fee English system. 'We have a narrow way of talking about benefit' (U-1).

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

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

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

Widening participation and social mobility. Most interviewees advocated, as a public good, widening participation to people from social groups under-represented in higher education. However, they had varying takes on higher education's effects in social equity and mobility. Some cited the Robbins principle, the public obligation to provide access to all who could benefit (P-1, P-11). Certain university-based interviewees claimed, without qualification, that their

institution's widening participation programme contributed to social mobility (e.g. U-3, U-5, U-10). But P-1 and a senior manager-leader at university 2 (U-12) emphasized that improving student development at earlier stages was essential to university access, and five interviewees questioned whether higher education made any substantial overall difference to social mobility (especially U-4, P-1, P-4, P-7). The policy professionals were the more sceptical, with three of them advancing the argument that by socially stratifying the population between those with degrees and those without, higher education generated what were in effect public bads:

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

(P-7, senior leader, national organization)

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

(P-1, regulator and policy maker)

Discussion

Almost all interviewees saw higher education as generating a complex set of individual and collective outcomes with heterogeneous benefits, consistent with Robbins (1963) and Dearing (1997) and flatly contradicting Browne (2010) and Augar (2019), which saw higher education's contribution solely or largely as individualized economic benefits. Interviewees also largely rejected the notion that public and private benefits were zero-sum (i.e. the more an outcome is 'private' the less it is 'public'), except when financing was discussed. They recycled the New Labour contradiction of the Dearing report, which combined expansive socially engaged higher education with the Treasury line on private benefits to justify fees. Interviewees wanted Robbins outcomes but had resigned themselves to Browne financing.

Public good emptied out

English policy on the public good outcomes of higher education has been hi-jacked, reworked and emptied out in Treasury's long successful drive to

implement a fee-based market. In the passage from Robbins to Browne and Augar education and research were locked down by financial accountability, risk assessment, product formats and competitive performance measures in limited and stratifying domains. One sign of this was the heightened awareness among interviewees of graduate earnings and employability. It was different when it came to public good outcomes. The intention to value non pecuniary benefits for individuals and collective benefits for society was there, but the competence and the energy to do so were not. These capable experienced interviewees, including half a dozen national leaders, found it difficult to express themselves persuasively on the public good. Many proffered tentative examples but there was no shared and robust concept.

Because there was no consensus about definitions and measures of public good outcomes, or their financing, or the respective roles of government and institutions, there could be no effective challenge to the idea of private pecuniary outcomes as universal descriptors of higher education in England, even though very few interviewees agreed with this. The Samuelson myth, that a private/public ratio of benefits drove in logical correlation a private/public ratio of costs, had become entrenched. That claim was on shifting sands. No one could define the economic value of public benefits on a comprehensive and conclusive basis. However, the unambiguous fact of observable, measurable private benefit was rhetorically powerful. That had been enough to sustain the politics of marketization.

As with some of Tomlinson's (2017b) students, there was no clear home for interviewees for whom higher education generated multiple individual and collective outcomes. They found themselves to be both inside and outside the market. Their answers oscillated between the constraints of day-to-day conditions and the ideals unfulfilled. Regulation, accountability for spare public outcomes, and self-interest, were real and potent. Absolute institutional autonomy and broad public good were normative but symbolic. In the real world partial corporate autonomy slugged it out with centralist top-down regulation of a neoliberal English kind.

In abstract all of higher education could be contained in a broad idea of the public good (at least for some), but in practice public good meant GDP and was generated within a rank ordered university competition game. Meanwhile, the value of domestic tuition, the unit of resource, was falling, and amid growing nativist resistance to migration it was becoming harder to grow international enrolments sufficiently to compensate (see Chapter 8).

Conclusions

The case of England is the end point of neoliberal marketization. The English state has evolved from a provider of multiple public and private goods in and through higher education to a guarantor of narrowly (and pejoratively) defined private goods, and not much more. Collective public goods provided by government are largely emptied out, except in research. In research the main form of government finance is grants for competitive projects with a limited life and outcomes sufficiently predictable to secure funding, which is the nearest public research comes to the commodity form. In education, government regulates individual private goods in the form of economic commodities, though it enforces standardized maximum tuition; it collects narrowly defined data on pecuniary outcomes, and thereby calibrates the value of courses in quasi-capitalist terms. Graduates who become hedge fund managers soar in apparent social value above lowly paid nurses and teachers. Government limits its compensation for market failure to the subsidization of unpaid individual tuition loans, and to the (primarily discursive) provision of individualized public goods as defined as 'equity' and 'employability' that are pathways to individualized private goods (see Chapter 5). As far as it can the British government crowds the role of the state into Quadrant 3.

If there is still a collective Robbins/Dearing public role for higher education, as the interviewees in this chapter plainly believed that there was, it is sustained by the institutions themselves, not government, and, extraordinarily, it is primarily financed by students (especially international students, many from countries poorer than England). Secondary sources for the financing of public goods are institutions marketing services and selling public good knowledge. Hence the moral foundations of the neoliberal social role of the higher education sector are dubious, undermining the sector's scope to build public support for itself as a public good.

In the universities discussed here, institution-driven public good was made more explicit in the regional university. In the London university the main public good domain discussed was that of research. But in the centralized monarchical English polity, devolved agents such as single higher education institutions have a weak capacity to shape outcomes. How can public good be effectively accumulated on a patchwork basis, piece by piece, in institution after institution, all pursuing individualized institutional policies that are necessarily grounded in their own status and survival? And how can systemic inequalities be

addressed by individual institutions? The neoliberal devolution of responsibility for public good is scarcely a recipe for efficient and equitable common outcomes. It is inescapable that if there is to be a common and collective public good, the state must take responsibility for providing it. In marketized systems that classical responsibility of state is refused. Neoliberal government in England has withdrawn not only from fostering the public good outcomes of higher education, but from higher education itself as a public good.

* * * * *

The neoliberal state in the Anglosphere shapes the higher system as it wants, even while shrinking its public accountability as small as it possibly can via devolution. The lynchpins of neoliberal policy discourse and system management are the neoliberal construction of (a) relations between education and work, and (b) social inclusion and equity. In neoliberal policy, it is believed that the economic contribution of higher education is secured by applying human capital theory (Chapter 4) and focusing on the employability of graduates (Chapter 5), regardless of the limitations of those imaginaries, the narrowing effects for individual students, and the reduction in the collective social benefits. Neoliberal policy has not wholly broken from the social democratic focus on equitable opportunity in higher education that began in the welfare state era. But equity too has been curtailed by sovereign individualism, as Chapter 5 will discuss.

Problems of Human Capital Theory

In the hands of Becker human capital theory was no longer a theory of how investments in individual skills contribute to rising national productivity and economic growth but was transformed into a universal theory of human behaviour. It was now about the essence of humanity (self-interest) and why market competition was an expression of our nature and therefore indispensable in delivering economic growth and an equitable society. Becker therefore offered a naked human capital that has exposed people to the full force of market competition. Human capital ideas were taken up around the world.

~ Phillip Brown, Hugh Lauder and Sin Yi Cheung, *The Death of Human Capital?*, 2020, Oxford University Press, Oxford, p. 7

Since the publication of Gary Becker's 1964 monograph on human capital theory, no idea of higher education has more closely shaped policy. Earlier it justified strategies of public investment in education; later it was mobilized to calibrate marketization (Marginson, 1993a; 1997) and to signal the stratified value of degrees in neoliberal systems (e.g. Augar, 2019). But that which is widely believed is not always right, intellectually or morally. This chapter provides a critical conceptual review of human capital theory, its understanding of relations between education and work and its applications to higher education policy.

The mainstream assumption of economic policy makers in the Anglosphere, and in many other countries, is that higher education serves the public good, which is equated with the level of measured GDP, by providing an opportunity framework in which selected student talent is augmented through education and training until the cost of that education equals the increased economic value that is created by graduate labour. Human capital theory determines the allocation of

scarce resources to education by states and individuals – if its core assumptions hold. But they do not hold. This chapter explains why.

* * * * *

Introduction: Human capital theory

Since its modern beginnings at the turn of the 1960s (Mincer, 1958; Schultz, 1959; 1960; 1961) and fuller development by Gary Becker (1964), human capital theory has constituted a fecund research programme in the economics of education, associated with many thousands of empirical studies. In the foundational narrative of human capital theory, education drives the marginal productivity of labour, and marginal productivity drives earnings. Correspondingly, the value of investment in education is defined by the lifetime earnings of educated labour. Education, work, productivity and earnings are seen in a linear continuum. When educated students acquire the embodied productivity (the portable human capital) used by employers, graduate earnings follow. In the pure and original form of the idea, higher education more or less automatically triggers private enrichment, career success and national economic growth. The claim about the contribution to economic growth made by aggregated investment in education as human capital, first asserted baldly by E.F. Denison (1962) and developed with more econometric sophistication in endogenous growth theory's account of education and knowledge in technologically driven development (Romer, 1990), is now a common policy assumption (Psacharopoulos, 1994; Keeley, 2007). In some countries, data on private rates of return to graduates are used to regulate the private/public split in education financing, between fee payments and government subsidies (Chapman et al., 2014), though there is debate about the respective roles of public and private investment.

The dominance of human capital theory in the economics of education is matched by its authority in the public and policy domains. Nevertheless, as discussed immediately below, there is a gap between the world imagined in the theory and the real economic and social world in which it is applied, and this gap may be growing. This chapter argues that human capital theory's failure to meet the test of realism derives not from lack of sophistication – since its foundation, there have been various innovations designed to increase its empirical purchase and utility – but from its meta-method. The limitations in meta-method, which

are discussed below, have led in turn to a flawed and narrow understanding of the relations between education and work. Unfortunately, the first mover authority of human capital theory has stymied the development and popularization of alternative conceptions.

The theory and its policy contexts

Founding modern human capital theory was the product of a particular historical moment that facilitated its genesis and spread. It evolved amid the building of mass higher education in the United States. The theory provided a rationale for the government-sponsored expansion of higher education, while also promising to efficiently regulate the pace and cost of expansion on the basis of the measured economic returns to graduates. The main ideas were propagated internationally by the United Nations Educational, Social and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO, 1968) and later the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD). They became general to economic policy at the same time as another policy discourse, social rather than economic, that of equality of opportunity through education. The two policy ideas were necessary to each other (Marginson, 1993a; 2016a). Equality of opportunity promised to optimize the economics of education by ensuring that all available potentially productive talent would be educated. Human capital theory provided an economic justification for investment in expanding educational opportunity.

In *Capital in the Twenty-first Century* (2014), Thomas Piketty shows that between the 1950s and the 1970s, conditions in the United States were unusually favourable for the reception of these ideas. The potential for upward social mobility via higher education was greater than usual. The Great Depression and the Second World War had evacuated many private fortunes. Income from inherited capital was at historically low levels, and to an extent not seen before or since, income from work was the main source of wealth (Piketty, 2014, p. 241). Amid excess demand for educated labour in both the public and private sectors, all graduates could obtain good jobs. This appeared to confirm human capital theory in practice and also underpinned contemporary optimism about the potential of higher education to create a fairer and more efficient society, in which educated merit and hard work would determine success, rather than prior family position. Becker's (1964) mathematization of human capital theory is permeated by the belief that all forms of capital other than human

capital (that is, financial, social and cultural capital) have lost their determining importance (Piketty, 2014, p. 385). The 1960s expansion of opportunity and social mobility enabled human capital economists to imagine that the theory was not just necessary in explaining the relationship between higher education and work, it was sufficient.

Half a century later, the context is different from that in which Becker published *Human Capital*. In the approximately seventy countries in which the higher education system includes 50 per cent or more of the youth cohort (UNESCO, 2024), in variant and often fluctuating economies, by no means all graduates enter professional jobs, while income inequality has dramatically increased in the United States (Saez, 2013; Piketty, 2014, p. 265), inheritance is more potent than before (p. 393), and income from capital outweighs income from labour as a source of wealth (p. 402). The power of family income and social and cultural capital in determining access to elite higher education and elite professional employment is attested repeatedly in research (e.g. Soares, 2007; Rivera, 2015; Social Mobility Commission, 2016). American social mobility is at a lower ebb than in the 1960s/1970s (Corak, 2013; Stiglitz, 2013).

Regardless, human capital theory still shapes understandings of relations between higher education and work. Though equality of opportunity falters in societies becoming more unequal, the idea of merit as learned and portable ability retains legitimating power. The notion of human capital, floating free of other forms of capital, implies that those with social advantages succeed not because of their birth and connections but because of their abilities and powers of application (Hennessy, 2014). In a 'hypermeritocratic' parody of the original human capital idea (Piketty, 2014, pp. 264–5), the exceptional salaries received by American super-managers are legitimated by their prior selection into leading universities (Rivera, 2015) and within performance pay regimes by their alleged super-productivity in the workplace (Hanley, 2011). In this curious backhand way, the core propositions at the heart of human capital theory have 'meritified' self-reproducing privilege, though the normative commitment of most mainstream economists is to equality of social opportunity.

Many human capital economists have grappled with these problems. Since 1960s, the human capital research programme (Blaug, 1976) has taken on greater complexity, and the foundational narrative has been considerably supplemented. Becker's later work (e.g. Becker and Murphy, 2003) seeks to account for the influence of the social setting on behaviours and choices, in the process extending his 1964 conception of productivity-generating skills

and knowledge beyond the education system. Other scholars draw attention to the influence of non-educational factors on earnings. For example, Glomm and Ravikumar (1992) combine choice-based investment in human capital with the capacity of parents to pass on endowments to their children, which they define as another component of human capital. This provides one possible reconciliation of human capital theory with unequal economic and social outcomes, suggesting that education may generate absolute economic gains through productivity advances while leaving relative benefits unchanged. Delaney, Harmon and Redmond (2011) investigate parental education as causal in relation to graduate earnings expectations. In the UK, Britton and colleagues (2016) studied graduates with ten years in the labour market, investigating the effects of variations in student characteristics and pathways. They note high dispersion in graduate outcomes (pp. 53–4), and find that ‘graduates’ family background – specifically whether they come from a lower or higher income household – continues to influence graduate’s earnings long after graduation’ (p. 55). Graduates from higher-income households earn at least 10 per cent more at the median than graduates from low-income households after factoring out other student characteristics, institution attended and field of study (p. 55). High-income origins protect graduates against low earnings and increase their prospects of very high earnings (p. 56).

Yet a feature of human capital economics is that despite the complexities and qualifications introduced by theorists, and notwithstanding variations in time and place in real-world contexts, the core 1960s propositions of the theory remain intact, at least as a partial truth. Crucially, human capital theory still functions as a default explanation of education and work. Other factors in the mix, which are mostly seen by economists as social rather than economic, seem to be pasted on to the human capital core, potential modifiers rather than the basis of an alternative explanation of higher education, work, incomes, income distribution and social outcomes. The human capital economist asks, ‘why doesn’t human capital theory work as it should, and what are the additional elements and modifications needed to make it work as it should?’ rather than ‘what is a new and better explanation of the relationship between education and work?’ Moreover, the economists’ own limits to the theory often drop away when human capital calculations are used instrumentally in policy; and the complexification of the theory scarcely impacts the larger public discussion about education and work. In short, it is the original and default explanation – rather than the qualifications, complexities and contextual issues – that continues to shape thought.

This is because human capital theory has become influential in policy and public thinking, not simply as an applied research programme and a set of econometric techniques deployed one way or another, but as a widely understood metaphor for relations between work and education, grounded in the foundational narrative of a linear continuum between education, work, productivity and earnings. It could be argued that this metaphor has become so widespread as to comprise part of the modern 'social imaginary' (Taylor, 2004), especially in societies in which capitalism is unquestioned and government is framed by neoliberalism. The popularization of human-capital-as-metaphor helps explain the 'pervasive belief in the power of degrees to both allocate individuals in the labour market and to serve as job requirements throughout the occupational structure' (Baker, 2011, p. 62). The notions that intellectual formation constitutes a mode of economic capital (Hodgson, 2014); that in the first instance higher education can be primarily understood as preparation for work and career; and that education itself, not family income or cultural attributes or social networks, is the starting point for an explanation of career outcomes and earnings: all these tropes have (arguably, unduly) elevated education as a social and economic arbiter. For example, in the UK and Australia, higher education institutions and their disciplines are held to account by government and public on the basis of graduate earnings and/or employment rates in the early years of work, regardless of other elements that affect employment and earnings (this is further discussed in Chapter 5). Correspondingly, the idea of education as self-investment in one's own capital positions graduates (or their portable human capital) as responsible for their own individual economic success/failure and weakens the obligation of government to steer a more equal income distribution.

By no means all economists are comfortable with the simplified version of the relations between higher education and work current in much policy rhetoric and public debate. Most professors of economics would firmly reject notions that the economic value of education can be reduced solely to its measured effects in earnings or jobs. Yet the intellectual strategy of human capital theorists has long been to protect the original ideas by rendering them more complex and nuanced, to add qualifying clauses, rather than question those ideas. Like most social scientists, human capital economists are not known for talking down their core idea. The founding paradigm has yet to be declared obsolete. In this manner, human capital theory, buttressed by human-capital-as-metaphor, continues to block from view alternative ideas, theories and measures concerning relations between education and work.

Critiques of human capital theory

Since its inception, human capital theory has been subject to repeated and often devastating critiques. Very few scholars from outside mainstream economics with a close research knowledge of education have endorsed human capital theory. Many scholars in the political economy of education and labour have challenged the core narrative, from Bowles and Gintis (1976) to Spring (2015). On the economics/sociology border, screening theory sees higher education not as a site of self-investment in cognitive formation that delivers economic returns but a system for signalling a competitive position that delivers economic returns – an alternative narrative to human capital theory using much the same evidence (e.g. the early study by Berg, 1971). Sociologists including Trow (1973), Collins (1979), Teichler (2009) and Baker (2011) provide different accounts of work and education. In his work on social reproduction in education, Bourdieu (1984; 1988) highlights positional competition and status, which human capital theory cannot encompass, and introduces family cultural capital and social capital networks as central explanations, not dispensable add-ons. The OECD (2014a) treats social background effects on vocational outcomes, and human capital effects, as intermeshed, without giving priority to one over the other.

A large literature explains socially differentiated educational outcomes more as a function of prior inequalities and institutional stratification in education than individual choices about self-investment in education, pointing to ways in which social inequalities affect aspirations (e.g. Hoxby and Avery, 2013) and are reproduced in educational structures (Boliver, 2011; 2013). In *The Global Auction* (2012), Brown and colleagues describe declining private returns and dispersion of graduate outcomes amid unequal and exploitative societies, again seeing a different world to that suggested by human capital theory.

However, most of the critical scholars are at cross-purposes with those they criticize. After all, any theory can be criticized from the standpoint of a different theory, and any discipline can be successfully interrogated from the perspective of another: successful that is, in terms of the discipline of critique. But sociological critiques have limited potential to persuade economists or change the minds of policy makers for whom economics is the master social science. Rather than posing an alternate theory or discipline as the basis of critique, it is more fruitful to go to the roots of human capital theory – to interrogate the default narrative in relation to its own purpose, which is to provide a universal explanation of relations between education and work. In this chapter, the basis of critique is historicization, which tests a theory against the empirical terrain it purports to

explain. The emergent weakness of human capital theory is a lack of realism. Friedman (1953) argued that economic theory does not need to be realistic to make viable predictions and secure normative effects. Yet for many economists, and more policy makers, a key idea that lacks realism does have a problem. Lack of realism undermines the scope of policy makers to understand and to act.

Human capital theory lacks realism in four areas. First, human capital theory uses a closed analytical system and independent variables, but neither external effects nor co-dependence of variables can be eliminated from the problems it addresses. Second, a linear theory is applied to material that is non-homogeneous in space and time. Third, human capital theory unifies two heterogeneous social domains, education and work, as if they are a single domain. Fourth, it eliminates other explanations of relations between education and work, of which there are many. It can be further argued that these weaknesses at the base of human capital theory derive from the underlying meta-method of its social science (Dow, 1990), which blocks the possibility of realistic explanations. The problems of meta-method, not unique to human capital theory, are: (1) the theory's claim to a universal theorization based on a single lens, and its closed system modelling of social relations; and (2) the mis-application of mathematical tools, and in particular, the use of multivariate analysis of social relations in contexts in which the variables are irretrievably interdependent.

The remainder of the chapter discusses these two problems of meta-method and then moves to the four points above. The discussion of meta-method draws on critical realism (e.g. Sayer, 2000; Bhaskar, 2008) and heterodox economics, realist and historicized bodies of thought that work across multiple disciplines and theorizations and use multiple methods. The limitations in human capital theory's understanding of relations between education and work will be discussed with reference to selected research on social stratification, work, earnings and higher education.

Limitations of meta-method

Universal lens and closed system

Human capital theory operates as a single and universal lens. The single exclusive lens rests on the dualistic proposition that there is only one possible truth about social phenomena, and that particular truth has absolute authority

(Dow, 1990; 2012). In this kind of social science, the researcher applies a fixed theoretical framework and linked methodology to a succession of empirical observations in different sites. The theory is seen as universally applicable to all sites. Obversely, the only phenomena that can be recognized in observation are those nominated in the template of the theory. It is as if an objective of research is to affirm the theoretical components by identifying and codifying them empirically. The weight of successive papers seems to 'prove' the master theory, but it is a test that tends to guarantee its own result. The possibility that the master theory is more applicable to some social sites than others is not considered. However, the succession of similar narratives has diminishing returns, in that they are increasingly less likely to create new knowledge.

Two lacunae follow from the use of a single exclusive lens. First, as suggested, observation is stymied in sites where the single lens does not readily apply to the material. Second, other possible explanations, arising from the use of many other lenses, are obscured. Researchers using a single lens might acknowledge limitations of their particular study but rarely question the capacity of the master theory to address any possible problem.

For universal explanations to work, they need closed systems with limiting premises. However, critical realism argues that social structures are always partly open, to other structures and agents, and historical contingency (Sayer, 2000). While a temporary partial closure is necessary in any research and analysis, the problem arises when analytical closure is placed beyond interrogation and has the force of a fixed and permanent law, as with human capital theory. This creates conditions for fallacies. Tony Lawson critiques neoclassical economics on the grounds that it imagines the economy as a closed system operating by deductive logic. 'Deductivism' is 'the thesis that closed systems are essential to social scientific explanation (whether the event regularities, correlations, uniformities, laws, etc., are either a prior constructions or a posterior observations)' (Lawson, 2012, pp. 3–4).

By deductivism I mean a type of explanation in which regularities of the form 'whenever event x then event y (or stochastic near equivalents) are a necessary condition. Such regularities are held to persist, and are often treated, in effect, as laws, allowing the deductive generation of consequences, or predictions, when accompanied with the specification of initial conditions. Systems in which such regularities occur are said to be *closed* ... If mathematical methods of the sort economists mostly fall back on are to be employed, closures are required (or presupposed). (Lawson, 2003, p. 5; emphasis in original)

If mathematical sets in economics are universally relevant, strict ‘event regularities’ must be ubiquitous in the real world. However, when deductivism is used in real-life contexts, ‘social event regularities of the requisite kind are hard to come by’ (Lawson, 2003, p. 13). ‘The problem as ever lies in the founding conceptualisation’ (Massey, 2005, p. 39):

Neoclassical economics has striven to distinguish itself from other social sciences, to give itself as much as possible the appearance of a “hard” science (the consequences of this in limiting its potential as a form of knowledge would be comical were they not, in their effects through analysis and policy, so tragic). (Massey, 2005, p. 34)

The alternative is to imagine the economy/education as a partly open system that does not manifest strict ‘event regularities’, to acknowledge the partial character of the truth about that system obtained through any one lens, and to open up ‘the possibility of a range of approaches’ (Dow, 2012, p. 82) that together can do more than a single lens. Theories ‘can vary according to changed times and circumstances’ (Carabelli and Cedrini, 2014, p. 44). This is also true of the policy applications of theory. Hence, human capital theory is closer to realism under full employment than high unemployment, and more explanatory of investment in financial management education than investment in music or drama programmes with negative rates of return. If no single discipline, theory or methodology has universal reach, by the same token, no one explanation excludes, cancels out or invalidates all other explanations. This means that in each specific research site and problem, it is necessary to identify the appropriate theoretical lens, or combine and match the appropriate lenses.

Problems of multivariate modelling

The high standing enjoyed by mathematical modelling in much of social science reflects a society-wide belief that mathematics is fundamental to science; a conviction (or ideology) that derives not just from the elegant simplification permitted by mathematics but also from the success of mathematical precision in many domains (Lawson, 2012, p. 16). However, the subject matter of the ‘social disciplines’ is often inappropriate for mathematical treatment (Carabelli and Cedrini, 2014, p. 31), especially when complex, holistic, synthetic accounts are required. ‘The fundamental problem of modern economics is that methods are repeatedly applied in conditions for which they are not appropriate’ (Lawson, 2012, p. 1) – mathematical methods are often applied

to phenomena they cannot adequately comprehend and problems they are not competent to solve. Mathematical methods have potential in research on education and work, as auxiliary tools in studying relations and comparisons. They can be used to map proportions and changes in bounded sub-systems. But in themselves, these methods do not explain; they illustrate. Sayer (2000, p. 22) notes that 'statistical explanations are not explanations in terms of mechanisms at all, merely quantitative descriptions of formal (not substantial) associations'.

One heterodox line of thought in economics rejects the main path taken by methods of mathematization and statistical modelling in human capital theory and parallel domains, particularly multivariate analyses that impose arbitrary definitions on indeterminate social variables in complex sites in which many variables are at play. Multivariate statistical analyses use probabilistic methods to distinguish nominal degrees of causality for each one of a set of variables. However, Alfred Marshall argued that when the subject matter is more complex, rather than devising ways of reducing that complexity, the economist should diminish the use of abstract reasoning and mathematics (Marshall, 1898, p. 39). For Marshall, the problem with much of the use of mathematics in economics is that the econometrician 'takes no technical responsibility for the material, and is often unaware how inadequate the material is to bear the strains of his [*sic*] powerful machinery' (Marshall, 1920/1961, p. 781).

Similarly, John Maynard Keynes noted that mathematical reasoning was formally rigorous yet hostage to the quality of the initial assumptions (Keynes, 1936/1973, pp. 297–8). In reflecting on the limits of statistical inference, Keynes noted that statistical analysis depends on the universal validity of assumptions, and is valid only when the variables used are wholly independent of each other (Keynes, 1921/1973, pp. 276–7; Lawson, 2012, pp. 1–2; Carabelli and Cedrini, 2014, pp. 28–9) – tests that many multivariate analyses fail to meet. As Keynes remarked, in economic thought 'we are faced at every turn with the problem of organic unity, of discreteness, of discontinuity – the whole is not equal to the sum of the parts, comparison of quantity fails us, small changes produce large effects, the assumptions of a uniform and homogeneous continuum are not satisfied' (Keynes, 1933/1973, p. 262; Carabelli and Cedrini, 2014, pp. 36–7).

The 'atomic hypothesis', which justifies inductive reasoning and mathematical calculus, cannot be applied to organic complex systems ... Keynes is critical of the attempt to blindly apply mathematics and statistics, with their assumptions of homogeneity, atomism and independence, to an economic material that

is essentially vague and indeterminate, not homogeneous, not divisible in homogeneous independent parts, not finite, and is characterised by organic interdependence. (Carabelli and Cedrini, 2014, pp. 29–30)

In the same vein, Pierre Bourdieu and Jean-Claude Passeron remark on the interdependent and organic character of the factors affecting social inequality:

It is the system of factors, acting as a system, which exerts the indivisible action of a structural causality on behaviour and attitudes ... so that it would be absurd to try to isolate the influence of any one factor, or, a fortiori, to credit it with a uniform, univocal influence at the different moments of the process or in the different structures of factors. (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1977/1990, p. 87)

A multivariate analysis of relations between higher education and work requires that all relevant variables are independent of each other, each separately interacts with the other variables, and all interactions are governed by a common law. Such conditions hold only in closed systems governed by a single universal logic. They do not apply in the real world of education and work, where many variables under consideration are impossible to conclusively separate from each other, for example family income, cultural capital, 'ability'. Worse, in many (if not most) human capital studies, the statistical correlation or coincidence between two variables is held to constitute not a suggestive association between them but a demonstration (or a strong suggestion) that they are causally related. It is remarkable how often statistically based research papers about higher education and earnings conclude with a statement equating correlation with causality, with weak or no qualification, and with little regard for the limits imposed by the contextual conditions in which the data were generated.

By no means are all multivariate analyses careless of these difficulties. Multicollinearity and endogeneity have generated a large body of literature. However, efforts to compensate for their problems from within the method are not conclusive; and if the limitations of the research are fully acknowledged, its precision and its generic claims are fundamentally undermined. This suggests that the solution often lies in stepping outside the multivariate framework.

Limitations in application

These problems are now considered specifically in relation to the application of human capital theory.

Bounded statistical analysis and organic realities

The OECD sees human capital theory as necessary but not sufficient, noting that 'a host of education-related and context-related factors' other than learning itself 'affect the returns to education' (OECD, 2014a, p. 151). Sociologists Arum and Roksa are more sceptical, arguing that 'colleges have little control over wage outcomes' (Arum and Roksa, 2014, p. 125).

As noted, there is a long literature on factors that affect earnings, in addition to higher education *per se*. Graduate earnings vary by the differential status and resources of higher education institutions ('college quality' in the US literature); family income (Wolniak et al., 2008, p. 131); family life not mediated by education (Triventi, 2013, p. 45) including support for child development such as whether children are read to at a young age (Corak, 2013); measured 'ability'; type of secondary school; and social and family networks at entry to higher education, entry to work and later careers (Bingley et al., 2011; Arum and Roksa, 2014, p. 14; Hallsten, 2014, p. 20; Borgen, 2015). Earnings are affected by varying customs and hierarchies in professions and workplaces; by the wage determination system and the industrial balance of power (Piketty, 2014, p. 305); and the configurations and fluctuations of economies. Given these factors – all constantly changing, though rarely changing on a constant basis – it is delusional to seek to measure or compare the quantity, quality or productivity of education programmes, institutions or systems, on the basis of the private rates of return to, or the rate of employment of, those graduates.

Statistical methods designed to eliminate the effects of factors other than higher education flounder given the number of variables, their interdependency, and the impossibility of isolating each causal factor from all the others. This, in turn, leads to problems of selection effects. While the economist struggles to find causality in the face of multicollinearity problems, comparisons are contaminated by hidden factors. It must be said that the problem of selection effects is a non-problem because it is grounded in the assumption that elements are atomistically separable. Nevertheless, in research premised on the assumption of atomism, the problem of selection effects must be solved. Attempts to account for selection effects generate diverse results. Reviewing research on graduate earnings in China, Hongbin Li and colleagues note that while some researchers identify returns to college selectivity after selection effects are accounted for, others find these returns disappear. Much of the variation in findings is due to arbitrary assumptions about selection effects, not to variations in the real world (Li et al., 2012, pp. 78–9).

Non-homogeneous and non-linear material

Human capital theory also fails to deal effectively with real-world sites in which patterns are non-linear and non-homogeneous. Borgen (2015) remarks in relation to studies of graduate outcomes that while averaging creates order from diversity, it does so 'by masking important heterogeneity across the wage distribution' (p. 43). He also identifies non-linear economic returns associated with higher education. Family background effects seem greatest at the top end of the wage distribution. 'The returns to college quality are five times larger at the 90th quantile compared to the 10th quantile' (p. 42). Wolniak and colleagues find that after graduation, education is associated with a growing impact on earnings in a non-linear fashion (Wolniak et al., 2008, p. 131). Bingley et al. (2011) researched the 'intergenerational transmission of employers' between fathers and sons. In both Canada and Denmark, 30–40 per cent of young adults at some time work for a firm that has employed their fathers. In both countries, the transmission of employers was positively associated with paternal earnings, 'rising distinctly and sharply at the very top of the father's earnings distribution' (pp. 3, 7 and 12). Again at the top end of incomes, Hussain et al. (2009) find that the apparent income effects of selective institutions inflate, and returns associated with degrees increase (p. 12). Lemieux (2006) finds that in the United States, over thirty years, 'within-group inequality grew substantially among college-educated workers, but changed little for most other groups' (p. 195). 'The median, the tenth and the ninetieth percentiles are remarkably stable for up to 12 years of education. However, 'above 12 years of education ... the return to education at the ninetieth percentile increases much more than the return to education at the tenth percentile, leading to a large increase in the 90–10 gap' (p. 196). Lemieux concludes that 'changes in wage inequality are increasingly concentrated in the very top end of the wage distribution ... [and] postsecondary education plays a crucial role in explaining this phenomenon' (p. 199). The empirical data are consistent with Bingley et al. (2011) and Borgen (2015), but Lemieux's interpretation is questionable. Is the concentration at the top end of incomes an effect of education, as Lemieux suggests, or due to something else?

These empirical patterns are consistent with Piketty (2014) and Saez (2013) on income inequality in the United States. In 2012, the top 1 per cent of income recipients received 22.5 per cent of all income, the second highest level since 1928 (Saez, 2013, pp. 7–9). Non-linear returns at the top end of the income distribution cannot be explained by human capital theory without introducing factors from outside the theory, eroding its universal claim. For if returns to

labour are simply driven by the chain of human capital and marginal productivity, then income inequality must also derive from unequal skills and productivity. Piketty comments wryly that while 'US educational institutions ... surely need to be improved and made more accessible', they 'probably do not deserve such extravagant blame' (Piketty, 2014, p. 330):

This very sharp discontinuity at the top income levels is a problem for the theory of marginal productivity: when we look at the changes in the skill levels of different groups in the income distribution, it is hard to see any discontinuity between 'the 9 per cent' and 'the 1 per cent', regardless of what criteria we use: years of education, selectivity of educational institution, or professional experience. (Piketty, 2014, p. 314)

The reality, however, is that higher education is largely decoupled from the surge in top incomes (Piketty, 2014, pp. 315 and 330). Most scholars studying work-based incomes in the United States see the blow-out in managerial salaries as more of a price effect than an education effect (e.g. Autor et al., 2008, pp. 317–18; Mouw and Kallenberg, 2010; Hanley, 2011; Bentele, 2013; OECD, 2014b), one grounded in tax cuts for high-income earners and work-related practices such as salary deregulation, de-unionization and performance-pay. Human capital theory cannot explain sharp variations in graduate incomes over time, nor differences in patterns of income distribution, and top-end earnings, in countries with similar higher education. 'A major problem' facing 'marginal productivity theory' is that 'the explosion of very high salaries occurred in some developed countries but not others. This suggests that institutional differences between countries rather than general and *a priori* universal causes such as technological change played a central role' (Piketty, 2014, p. 315, also pp. 304, 308, 321). Nevertheless, the non-linear earnings pattern is suggestive, implying that higher education affects American occupational outcomes less among high-income earners than among middle-level earners. While this again undermines the universal claim of human capital theory, it suggests a fruitful opening for further research.

Heterogeneity of higher education and work

The human capital equations unify higher education and work at the cost of suppressing much that is distinctive about each. Arguably, work and higher education are different kinds of social site, each with its distinctive history, requirements, daily practices, subject-positions, rhythms and drivers. This

does not mean work and higher education are unconnected. Graduation is associated with higher employability and earnings (OECD, 2014a, pp. 102–70), whether due to superior attributes of graduates acquired prior to or during their education, their signalling power in labour markets, or a process of legitimization whereby higher education launders prior social inequalities. Some higher education is in explicit continuum with work (e.g. programmes that train professionals such as doctors), and many higher education programmes have occupational contents. Students and graduates, higher education institutions, professions and employers often make strenuous efforts to connect education and work. However, the linear transition imagined in the human capital narrative does not describe higher education/work relations. The transition is often fraught. The education/work alignment is partial and unclear. Relations between the two domains are multiple, context-bound, fragmented, uneven and must be continually worked on.

For many graduates, job allocation lacks precision, especially in US higher education with its high proportion of generic degrees (Roksa, 2005, p. 225). Roksa and Levey state:

Many educational credentials have no obvious matches in the labour market. This includes the majority of high school graduates in general and academic tracks and a large portion of college graduates majoring in liberal arts and sciences. Consequently, finding a job in one's field of study is not only an individual dilemma, it is a process that reflects the relationship (or lack thereof) between the educational system and the labour market. (Roksa and Levey, 2010, p. 391)

Schneider and Stevenson (1999, pp. 79–85) find that only 44 per cent of students had 'aligned' educational ambitions, meaning they planned to complete the amount of education required by their intended occupations. Many students keep their vocational options open. Often they enrol for more or different reasons than vocational planning, studying subjects they are good at, or they enjoy, while hoping that the future will work out. Though this strategy embodies uncertainty, because all graduates have a positional advantage in the labour market vis-a-vis non-graduates, such confidence is not wholly misplaced. Robst (2007, p. 398) notes 'the eventual match between degree field and occupation is uncertain when selecting a major'. He finds that 55 per cent of respondents report a close relation between their work and field of study, 25 per cent state they are 'somewhat related', and 20 per cent that they are not related (p. 402), though Robst has difficulty defining the work-relatedness of general degrees.

Even among specifically trained graduates, many enter occupations that are outside their fields of training, not always with income penalties (van der Werfhorst, 2002, p. 301; Robst, 2007, pp. 403–4; Melguizo and Wolniak, 2012, p. 383). The lack of fit between formal training and work reflects the messy way that labour markets operate. Many professional jobs are generic. They can be filled by graduates from any field. Level of education, and possibly institution attended, are more significant than field of study. Many graduates take jobs that provide the best pay and career prospects at the time of selection. At this career point, some will depart from their qualifications and a proportion never return. Some specialized positions are filled by persons trained in specialist fields other than that of the position. For their part, employers select the 'best' person from the available pool. Here specific training and qualifications are only two of the factors in play. Studies of graduate selection indicate that the attributes of potential employees that influence selection also include the institutions attended by the graduates, their extra-curricular activities as students, subjective perceptions of 'fit' between the graduate and workplace, and personal ties (e.g. Bingley et al., 2011; Tholen et al., 2013; Borgen, 2015; Rivera, 2015).

There is more vocational specificity in education and predictable pathways to work in countries such as Germany than in the United States. In Germany, this is achieved not by market coordination in education and work as Becker imagined, but by 'tight linkages between occupational groups, education and training practices, and certification boards'. German practice appears to conform 'nicely to human capital models' but 'these completely fail to capture the importance of the elaborate institutional framework that enables the German certification regime to operate as they predict' (Hansen, 2011, p. 32).

Nor does human capital theory explain how education enhances productivity (p. 43) which remains a black box. One constraint is the methodological individualism of the theory (Lukes, 1973). It is impossible to accurately attribute enhanced value to particular individuals working in a combined workplace, as is the case for most employees (Piketty, 2014, pp. 330–1).

Other explanations of education and work

Human capital theory understands only some students/graduates, those who consider the lifetime earnings attached to different choices and weigh them against the costs of study. Many students/graduate fail at being a choice-making self-investing *homo economicus*. Jens Thomsen and colleagues report that at enrolment

some students ignore forgone earnings during study (Thomsen et al., 2013, p. 471). Others know graduate earnings only in their chosen occupation, not related fields (Robst, 2007, p. 399). Borgen (2015, p. 34) states that many students do not 'self-select into colleges based on expected gain'. Students have many interests in addition to credentials, future earnings and careers, including network building (Armstrong and Hamilton, 2013); the accumulation of knowledge, generic skills and cultural capital; intellectual formation as an end in itself; cultural activities; and social or political activism. Many choose to study where their friends are studying. They mix their goals, practices and modes of reflexivity. However, if one other effect is admitted, then human capital theory can no longer function as a closed system.

Because it is a closed system, human capital theory has never adequately addressed its cousin, screening theory. There is evidence for the presence of the signalling function (just as there is evidence some students estimate lifetime earnings in different jobs), though screening no more constitutes a universal explanation than does human capital theory. For example, Arum and Roksa (2014, pp. 80–1) note that business graduates have strong early wage returns, despite relatively low measured cognitive formation in that field. 'Some majors serve as better signals of employability than others, regardless of whether those degrees are underpinned by actual field-specific knowledge and skills'. OECD data on earnings suggest that in some countries the returns to qualifications exceed the returns to measured skills, in other countries the ratio is reversed (OECD, 2014a, p. 109). Both human capital and signalling effects are at play (and without excluding other effects). Yet often social scientists feel obliged to choose between them as alternate universal explanations (e.g. Wolniak et al., 2008, pp. 124–5; Baker, 2011, p. 8; Hu and Vargas, 2015, p. 3).

Human capital theory also fails to encompass occupational and social status in education and work, which are not fully captured by the earnings function. Arum and Roksa (2014, p. 57) emphasize that 'rewards to occupations are related not just to income but also to occupational status and prestige. In social settings, individuals are typically asked about what they do, not how much money they earn'. Many studies identify status goals and effects, and variations in the respective roles of earnings and status outcomes, by gender, by field of study and 'college quality', between countries and over time (e.g. Zhao, 2012; Triventi, 2013, pp. 55–7; Thomsen et al., 2013, p. 471; Arum and Roksa, 2014, pp. 80–1; Hennessy, 2014, p. 47; Hu and Vargas, 2015). Investigating outcomes for thirteen-year out graduates, Roksa finds that for those holding generic degrees and working in the public and non-profit sectors, a managerial role is often more attractive than higher earnings. 'Graduates of female-dominated fields are

disproportionately employed in public and non-profit organizations which offer lower monetary rewards but facilitate access to professional and managerial positions' (Roksa, 2005, p. 207).

The passage of time affects income and status in contrasting ways in different fields of study. 'Occupationally specific degrees are beneficial at the point of entry into the labour market but have the lowest growth in occupational status over time' (Roksa and Levey, 2010, p. 389), though they do better in earnings (p. 399). Separately associated with both level of education and political standing, status opens the way to jobs and income. Triventi (2013) in four European countries, and Hu and Vargas (2015) in China, find that 'college quality' is associated with higher occupational status. Hu and Vargas (2015) note that status is a signal of prestige to employers and correlates with the likelihood of a managerial position (p. 19).

Conclusions

Human capital theory presents its core propositions about education, learning, productivity and earnings as a necessary and sufficient truth about higher education and work, albeit (in some studies, to varying degrees) joining these core propositions to caveats and moderating factors at the periphery. The theory's claim about its universal application, in conjunction with the intellectual and policy dominance it has long exercised, has disrupted the possibility of a social science of education and work at a higher level of real-world complexity.

Higher education and work are different and separated social sites, though there are important overlaps in practice. This is not a relationship of identity, regularity or a linear continuum. Nor is it a dialectic, in which two contrasting parts form a unified system with a shared logic. Education and work are heterogeneous in relation to each other. Their relations are never wholly resolved or resolvable in practice; and if a final resolution is attempted in theory then something can be lost from view (for example, the generic or liberal component of intellectual formation in higher education, which has no specific vocational aspect, slips from empirical sight, or appears negative). Relations between higher education and work are also context-bound. They vary by country, field of study, type of institution, financing of education, occupation, industry, employment site and over time. For example, both Goodman (2014) and Zhao (2012) note that status drivers are especially important in China, arguably playing a larger role in comparison with income drivers than in the United States. The task of

a realist study of education/work is to combine sensitivity to context with an account of larger patterns, including aspects of social relations not directly observable (Sayer, 2000). These patterns are both internal and external. Like all semi-bounded systems, the dyad of higher education and work is connected to other systems or 'fields' (Bourdieu, 1993; Fligstein and McAdam, 2015), including income determination and wealth creation, labour markets, state and politics, taxation, public spending and programmes, global flows.

Given that relations between education and work entail complex and multiple phenomena – and no theorization can contain all phenomena, while retaining a bounded coherence – it is axiomatic that more than one description of education/work relations can provide useful insights. Gerber and Cheung (2008, p. 301) canvass four possible reasons for the higher earnings of graduates of elite higher education institutions: elite institutions impart more valuable human capital, elite graduates signal their status to employers, students in elite higher education institutions garner more valuable social capital, graduates from elite higher education institutions have enjoyed advantages such as family affluence or ability that generate more favourable outcomes in work and career. However, in their paper, they do not consider the possibility that all four factors could be in play, with the mix varying over time and between countries and between fields of study. In orthodox sociology, as in orthodox economics, theoretical multiplicity is mostly a bridge too far. The drive for universal explanation, that elusive talisman of social science, overrides real-world complexity.

Hansen (2011) rightly argues that all major theories of education/work relations, such as human capital, signalling and 'credentialist' certification, are 'to some degree wanting' (p. 31). The obverse is also true. Differing research-based explanations of education and work contribute to knowledge. Some are more explanatory than others. Confronting the complexity of education/work, the task of research is to determine which explanation(s) are primary, not to impose an exclusive straight-jacket on the material.

It is not the purpose here to outline an alternate theorization to human capital economics. However, an alternate approach would be grounded in a meta-method that would use a semi-open analytical system or model, admit multiple theories rather than one exclusive theory, and draw on both quantitative and qualitative research and combine their insights. Statistical reasoning would have a modest role. In slicing into parts of the empirical terrain, statistical studies can be suggestive. For example, in research on top-end graduate incomes, the findings become interesting where the linear patterns break down. The limits of statistical analysis show not when it is used for specific inquiry but where it

purports to provide a holistic picture, when it is substituted for a historicized synthesis, and multivariate modelling and calculation are used as a substitute for more difficult processes of complex judgement. If the use of multivariate analysis was limited to instances when the variables *are* independent, this would open space for the richer and more grounded explanations that are sorely needed.

* * * * *

This chapter has explained why the core assumptions of human capital theory do not hold and hence why it cannot suffice as a universal explanation of the relation between education and work, or define the individual or social value of education. Notwithstanding the overwhelming evidence presented here, human capital theory retains its power in neoliberal policy on higher education, both as a technology for calculating the value of individual and collective investment in education and a metaphor that conditions governmental and public expectations of higher education. Human capital theory has become essential in the struggle of states to confine higher education as far as possible to Quadrants 3 and 4 (see Figure 2.1 in Chapter 2). This creates a host of problems, not just because human capital theory is untrue in itself but because its application is destructive. It pushes much of what higher education does and can do beyond the gaze of mainstream policy.

The next chapter (5) reflects on how, because marketization and human capital theory have not generated the expected outcomes, policy makers have devised 'employability' to somehow bring the human capital equation into being, and the costs that this has imposed. It also discusses the older policy goal of social equity in higher education. In the Anglo-American policy mainstream, strictly individualized forms of equity and employability are all that is left of the public good in the education function of higher education.

Equity and Employability as Individualist Public Goods

Our fundamental mistake is to believe that greater social mobility is the desired goal and that increased equality of opportunity is the way to achieve it. In reality, neither is possible without greater equality of condition ... We need to find ways of making people's starting points much more similar. In a more equal society, not only would it be easier for those from relatively disadvantaged family backgrounds to get to university and to experience higher education to the full, it would also matter much less for any given individual's future socioeconomic prospects whether they went to university or not.

~ Vikki Boliver, Misplaced optimism: How Higher Education Reproduces Rather Than Reduces Social Inequality, *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, 38 (3), 2017, p. 432

Chapter 4 discussed the 1960s origins of the two policy narratives that have shaped the massification of higher education: equality of opportunity and human capital theory. They began in a time in the United States that unusually favoured social mobility through education. Those conditions did not last. Places at the top of society filled up, income inequality increased, professional job creation slowed and the 1980s neoliberal revolution restored the political power of accumulated capital (Marginson, 2016a). But neoliberalism absorbed the meritocratic ideal, which legitimated market outcomes and governments carried forward the 1960s policy narratives. Equality of opportunity and human capital theory continued to be functional for ministers of education and university leaders, and they universalized a dream of educational merit as the pathway to the prizes of life that in reality only a few could achieve.

As the neoliberal period evolved, educational participation in the Anglosphere kept growing and states and capital became more reluctant to carry the costs. Responsibilities for both outcomes and costs were increasingly devolved

downwards, to the student and the institution. 'Responsibilisation' is a fundamental tool of neoliberal governance (Rose, 1999). In higher education it was joined to revised policy discourses that continued the commitment to meritocracy but on the basis of a less ambitious social mission. Public good in higher education seemed to shrink. The collective democratization of society in and through education, the dream of social opportunity and well-remunerated productivity for all, became narrowed down to solely individualized access and employability.

* * * * *

Introduction: Individualized public goods

Neoliberal policy frameworks in the Anglosphere have not abandoned all public good in higher education, but in the spirit of Samuelson (1954) the surviving public goods have been attenuated. They synchronize with the market economy and match its needs and forms. Neoliberal 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 this framework collective relations and collective public or common good as such are impossible. As the foundational neoliberal political leader, UK Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher (1987), stated in a *Women's Own* interview: 'Society? There is no such thing. There are individual men and women and there are families'. Hence in higher education policy, the two surviving public goods associated with student programmes – social *equity as access* and participation (the historical inheritor of equality of educational opportunity, a term still sometimes used) and the *employability* of graduates as human capital – take the form of individualized properties from which causal structural social relations have been largely rinsed out.

Both of these attenuated public goods serve the market society that is imagined by neoliberalism. Social equity (fairness) in access to higher education becomes defined as the right of access to individualized pecuniary goods, which when universalized creates the optimum talent pool for the economy. The potential for upward economic and social mobility on the basis of individual merit is still crucial to this kind of equity, but neoliberal policy imagines free scope for social mobility without challenging the underlying educational and social structures that actually block equal opportunity. The language of widening participation

is still there, echoing 1940s welfare state universalism and 1960s equality of opportunity, but reforms to democratize the tiered education system are not.

Meanwhile, investment in human capital, which was always a market-friendly idea, has been more explicitly individualized. Students fund their own investment in human capital rather than the state doing so on their behalf as in the 1960s. The junction between higher education and the labour markets is meant to be secured by graduate employability. This subordinates the students-as-human-capital to the external forces of the labour market. It also locks in and holds to account institutions as producers of employability by regulating them with external reference points including employer requirements, standardized training packages, and measures of graduate salary outcomes. Graduate salary data are used to measure and compare the employability 'performance' of institutions and disciplines. Government mobilizes market forces in higher education to discipline universities, which become remade as producers of compliant graduates for labour markets and for the corporations that dominate those labour markets.

Unlike neoliberal equity, there is no hint of social justice left in employability. Nor is it a fair measure of institutional performance in higher education. Education is not the only factor that determines graduate outcomes. But in employability-focused policies the shaping effects of social background on those outcomes, and the fluctuations of labour markets, are hidden.

This chapter reviews these two neoliberal public goods. It discusses definitions, extant research and recent policies in England, with some references to the United States, Australia and Europe. It also discusses the wider implications. Employability, which has gained growing prominence and seems to be at least partly displacing equity, has become the carrier of aggressive Anglo-American state interventions that are essentially orthogonal to learning and certification in disciplinary knowledge. This threatens to undo the academic core which has sustained higher education since its historical beginnings.

Equity

Social equity in education means fairness. At best, it is a keystone public good that makes other public goods possible – for example, when associated with openness in higher education, or the social responsibilities of institutions, or the expansion of individual and collective agency freedoms, or measured improvement in equal outcomes for people from disadvantaged backgrounds. Its meaning depends on the policy agendas in which it is set.

Mainstream equity policy in higher education has long been associated with two different goals seen as consistent with the meritocratic ideal. The first goal, equity as social inclusion in higher education, which is broadly, though not universally, agreed, has accompanied the ongoing expansion of enrolments (see Chapter 1). However, in tiered systems in which student places have unequal value, this raises the questions 'access to what?' and 'by whom?' Is an advance in the population's levels of education in absolute terms also an advance in social equality in relative terms, within the population? The second goal is equity as equal access of students from all social groups (e.g. by socio-economic origin, geographical region, gender, ethnicity/race, ableness) to educational opportunities and perhaps also equal access to labour markets after education. In tiered systems, this poses the question of equal access of social groups to socially and academically elite institutions. In the UK this means Oxford and Cambridge, which have exceptional status, and other Russell Group universities. Elite university access offers a readily comprehensible narrative of upward social mobility. It is the sharp end of equity debate in England (Boliver, 2013; 2015).

In practice, the two goals are in partial tension. As higher education systems expand, it becomes more difficult to equalize social access in general and to elite institutions (Cantwell et al., 2018). Studies in both unequal United States and more equal Sweden show that when participation grows, new places are taken up disproportionately by the middle class (Arum et al., 2007; Belley and Lochner, 2007). As numbers increase, places in elite institutions do not expand in proportion. Entry to those elite institutions becomes more competitive, favouring families with superior financial, social and cultural resources with which to compete. Newly participating families tend to concentrate in lower-tier institutions (Shavit et al., 2007).

Higher education and social inequality

Higher education is part of a larger circuit of social reproduction (Figure 5.1). What difference can education make to social outcomes? Does it have independent causal power? How much are social outcomes via education shaped by prior student family circumstances?

The question posed by 'what can education itself do?' is a many-sided problem that is subject to continuing research. A short answer is that education's scope for causal power is a social fact, but it is often exaggerated. It is not universal and depends on the context: on the history, on the structural factors in play and on the imaginings and practices of agents.

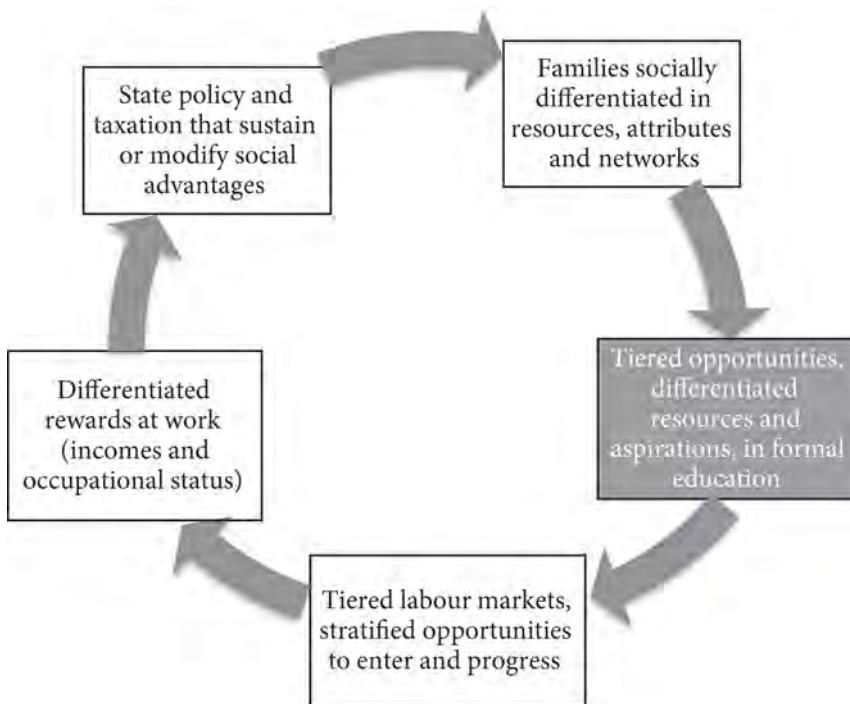


Figure 5.1 Social reproduction of equality and inequality.

Source: Author.

At each stage in Figure 5.1, individual trajectories move within unequalizing processes: differing family income and wealth, geographic and cultural location, social networks, family and individual aspirations and agency; diverse institutions and opportunities inside educational structures; labour markets with tiered opportunities and careers of unequal value; differentiated remuneration, status and social power at work; state policies of taxation and spending which can differentiate between individuals and locations. State intervention can both reduce and enhance inequalities in other domains, like the labour markets. All of the balls are in the air and have gravitational effects on each other.

To a varying degree in all societies, structures and processes in education replicate inherited inequalities and are colonized by social groups in their own interests (Marginson, 2016b; 2018a). ‘Socioeconomically advantaged actors secure for themselves and their children some degree of advantage wherever advantages are commonly possible’ (Lucas, 2001, p. 1652). School and higher educational systems are often stratified between institutions, creating student trajectories of unequal value. Structural factors that differentiate populations

include tracking and curricular differentiation at school, university fields of study that have differentiated value, tuition fee barriers and private tutoring outside class, and graduate labour markets with unequalizing entry points that are often partly closed. All of these structures provide opportunities and incentives for families with private resources to secure advantage by investing money, energy and time and by working social networks (Bingley et al., 2011; Corak, 2013, p. 93; Schindler et al., 2024, especially p. 47). The influence of unequal family background, joined to education, persists well into graduate careers (Britton et al., 2016 – see Chapter 4. Inequalities in the graduate labour market are discussed below).

Schindler et al. (2024) note that social mobility research finds education to be the most important factor mediating inter-generational income mobility – the extent to which the incomes of children differ from their parents – but the mode and extent of education's role vary by country and over time (pp. 45, 57). Its effects also vary within national populations. In a study of intergenerational social mobility in Denmark, Hjorth-Trolle and Landerso (2024) find that for children from low-income families, the key factor in mobility outcomes is whether parents are working, and for children from the top 5 per cent, the key factors are capital income and business contacts, while for children from the largest part of the distribution, which is in the middle, education appears to be the main factor in explaining mobility outcomes. Yet in the overall social shaping of incomes and wealth, workplace remuneration and the government tax and spend regime seem to be the primary influences overall (OECD, 2014b). They are more important than education. However, higher education may play a larger role in the allocation of social status than of income.

Arguably, higher education can both reduce and enhance the stratification and inequalities generated in the rest of Figure 5.1, especially family backgrounds. It depends on how education and society are configured. Yet, overall, the role of higher education seems to be primarily reproductive. Tentatively, research literature suggests that in societies that are relatively 'flat' in terms of incomes, wealth and status, with a high degree of inter-generational income mobility, the education system operates on a relatively equal basis. Denmark, Norway and Finland make a determined effort to engineer greater equality by building high participation higher education with low stratification and universally high quality across all institutions in the national system. Even so, in those countries, at best education helps to keep social equality constant (Valimaa and Muhonen, 2018). In unequal societies like the UK and more so the United States (Corak, 2013; OECD, 2014b), higher education is likewise more steeply stratified in costs,

value and outcomes. Arguably, societies fashion higher education in their own image, more than they pattern themselves through their education systems. This is not to say equal provision does not matter, or that higher education does not touch equality, only that higher education institutions acting alone are unable to transform social inequality in capitalist societies, as Vikki Boliver (2017) suggests.

Yet it suits all governments to position higher education as more socially powerful than it is. It is easier for them to admonish universities for insufficient social mobility than to shift workplace remuneration or to raise taxes. Handing the responsibility for people's trajectories to higher education not only absolves the government of that responsibility, it allows it to avoid confronting the structure of social inequalities by reducing the position of the economically powerful, which is the last thing that any neoliberal government wants to do. It is easier to talk up social mobility when someone else has to do it. Until 2021 England strongly emphasized social mobility as an equity goal in higher education (Millward, 2022; Willetts, 2025). This reinforced the ideology of meritocracy, and responsibilization ensured that when higher education expansion failed to generate an uplift in mobility, then by definition, elite barriers in higher education itself were to blame.

Equity in England

In most of the Anglosphere, including the United States, Canada, the UK and Ireland, 'the effect of social background on educational achievement is comparatively high' in levels of both credentials achieved and the learning that takes place (Boliver and Capsada-Munsech, 2024, p. 17). Social backgrounds are also routinely ignored. Educational achievement, a socially constructed quality, has been individualized. Returning it to social context can invite fierce resistance.

In the UK, historically high inequality in access for students from 'different class backgrounds' persisted until the 1990s, declining only when the enrolment rate of students from advantaged backgrounds approached saturation (Boliver, 2011). Over the same period, social inequalities in access to elite universities scarcely budged (Boliver, 2013), a pattern that has continued, as in many other countries. In a study of three successive birth cohorts in the UK, Bukodi and Goldthorpe (2016) find that with expansion, socio-economic differences in the absolute level of educational achievement partly closed, but relative social differences were stable. Families from affluent social backgrounds retained their comparative advantage in higher-level qualifications (p. 11). The long UK biases in favour of families with cultural capital, and families using high-fee

independent schools with three times the resources per student as state schools (Cheung and Egerton, 2007; Dorling, 2014), are well documented. Elite universities in the UK steepen inequalities by selecting students prior to final school results (Boliver et al., 2022); while in the United States, elite universities use both academic tests and indicators of extra-curricular achievement that are attuned to elite families (Rivera, 2015). In this manner, social and educational stratification come to map onto each other. The resulting pattern of reproduction 'seriously compromise the in-theory potential of higher education to serve as a vehicle for mobility' in relation to both access to higher education and graduate labour market outcomes (Boliver, 2017, p. 424).

Like social and economic inequality in general, the pattern long predates neoliberal policy. What has changed in neoliberal UK, especially since the introduction of the full-fee market in 2012, is that neoliberal regulation has taken off the potential policy agenda the kind of large-scale social democratic structural reforms (e.g. universal student grants so no students have to work during study, closure of resource gaps between high and lower tier universities, resource strengthening of further education, alternate entry routes to university, quotas for equity entry at elite universities) that could modify the social pattern of inequality. This has moved the policy focus to aspirations, application behaviours, characteristics and measures of individuals at entry into higher education. Further, structural social inequalities in the graduate labour market are not discussed either.

Boliver and Powell (2022) urge that 'the traditional meritocratic equality of opportunity paradigm' should be replaced by 'the meritocratic equity of opportunity model of fairness, involving the assessment of prospective students' qualifications in the light of their socio-economic circumstances' (p. 8). In entry into elite institutions, this means contextual admissions schemes, with reductions in the grades needed by applicants from specified social groups (Boliver et al., 2019; Boliver and Powell, 2022), and also foundation years and other support to facilitate the academic entry and survival of students from disadvantaged backgrounds. Contextual admissions means changing the agency and identity of individual students at the point of entry, in the name of making meritocracy work. As will now be described, for a moment in England this seemed almost possible, even in the neoliberal era.

'Social mobility action plan'. In 2004, the then UK Labour government established a £3000 tuition fee and balanced this act of marketization by emphasizing equity. A Director of Fair Access was created (Millward, 2022, pp. 11–2). Monies collected as tuition fees were partly earmarked for equity initiatives. Institutions were expected to generate widening participation plans.

For a long period, the main focus was on student bursaries (p. 20), but with tuition paid by income-contingent student loans, and no monies paid at the point of entry, bursaries had modest effects on the student mix. In 2018, the new Office for Students adopted a tougher 'social mobility action plan' (p. 23): 'Every individual in England should have the opportunity to build a good life for themselves and to reach their potential, regardless of their background' (p. 24).

High-prestige UK institutions traditionally used a narrow notion of academic merit based on past achievement rather than future academic potential, fostering 'a deficit model of students from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds, misrecognizing them as lacking the ability to succeed at degree level' (Boliver and Powell, 2022, p. 13). This created a potential collision between on one hand elite academic individualism, on the other hand the meritocratic individualism of neoliberal regulators. Perhaps, also, the UK government saw potential to gather populist credit in a confrontation with the elite universities. The Director for Fair Access and Participation, Chris Millward (2022) was granted additional powers to set requirements of institutions, and priority was placed on the introduction of contextual admissions in 'the highest tariff universities' (p. 26). Boliver and Powell (2023) report that there was widespread interest in the use of contextual admissions, though Oxford, Cambridge and Imperial College London were unwilling to reduce entry requirements.

The UK policy of 2018–2021 was at the outer limit of equity policy in a neoliberal order. It reworked structural social factors as individualized indicators of disadvantage that articulated student progression up the ladder, akin to the use of DEI (diversity, equity and inclusion) indicators when hiring faculty. The logic was that once all individuals had the full opportunity to shine, a rational distribution of merit could emerge. It was as far as neoliberal systems could go in acknowledging the structures of class and white supremacy, and it generated pushback from populist-conservative political forces, as in the United States.

If contextual admissions, school outreach and academic help had been sustained at scale for long enough, the social composition of the elite UK sector might have altered. However, after the 2019 election, the commitment to equity at entry faltered. In 2020, the long-standing national target of 50 per cent participation in higher education was achieved, but in the same year, populist-conservatism gained the upper hand in the Conservative government. Ministers began to cast doubt on the wisdom of further growth and the use of equity indicators, though many more young people still wanted to enter (Willets, 2025, p. 8). Amid talk of 'low value courses', in institutions

serving poor regions where many graduates earning below average salaries, one government directive in 2021 stated that 'encouraging more and more students onto courses which do not provide good graduate outcomes does not provide real social mobility and serves only to entrench inequality' (cited in Millward, 2022, p. 31). The institutions were responsible, not structural inequality. Millward's appointment ended. The Office for Students withdrew from the transformation of entry into the elite universities. The meritocratic neoliberal crusade for upward social mobility was over.

Employability

Studies of what students want from higher education find that many have multiple agendas. A 2021 UK survey of 27,000 students, by the Universities and College Admissions Service (UCAS) and focused on the reasons for course choices, found that 74 per cent had chosen the subject 'I enjoy the most', 39 per cent chose 'the subject I am best at', while 54 per cent thought it would 'give me good career prospects after graduation' (Willetts, 2025, p. 42). 'Current debates tend to be framed as if students have a single relationship with their education' in which they are consumers or not, state Ashwin et al. (2023). 'However, students have a number of different relationships with their education' (p. 2).

Some students in the UK identify with a single mission of higher education; others have plural orientations. Some reject the student-as-consumer label. A larger group are consumers, and also more than that. Most student are concerned about work and career after graduation though not all expect their studies to specifically prepare them for work. An employability focus is often combined with immersion in learning or knowledges, and/or social activity and personal self-formation (e.g. see the studies by Tomlinson, 2017b; Nuseibeh, 2022; Ashwin, 2024). Yet in the Anglo-American public policy space, and many universities, 'employability' is often presented as the dominant or sole mission of higher education, and employable graduates are seen as people who do what employers want, not what the graduates themselves want.

Social structures and graduate labour markets

Graduate labour markets are more than a space in which individual trajectories play out. They are subject to prior social shaping, and not as a level playing field. As noted, social differences in student backgrounds continue to shape unequal

outcomes through working life. ‘Working class graduates even from prestigious institutions and courses are less likely to step into a graduate level occupation than their socially advantaged peers’ (Boliver, 2017, pp. 424, 431). In elite banking, law and consulting in the United States, very few such graduates are interviewed (Rivera, 2015). Corak (2013) notes the study by Bingley et al. (2011) which identifies the ‘intergenerational transmission’ factor in the labour market, especially in high-income families (see also Chapter 4).

Differentiated social backgrounds interact with hierarchical educational structures and in turn with stratified labour market structures (see Figure 5.1). In an eleven-country comparative study, Triventi (2013) finds: ‘All else being equal, the higher is the stratification of higher education, the more important is the role of social background in the occupational attainment process’ (pp. 48–9). This is also truer of systems where most graduates hold generic rather than vocationally specific qualifications (e.g. Borgen, 2015 on the United States and Norway; Di Stasio et al., 2016), as do many UK graduates. Such systems enhance the role of signalling factors, including institutional and field of study hierarchies. When education is a positional competition, ‘what is important for occupational returns is the relative position of individuals in the distribution of educational qualifications and in a hypothetical job search queue’ (Triventi et al., 2016, p. 49).

In stratified academic/vocational systems like the Netherlands and Germany, much of the vocationally specific learning takes place in formal education, strengthening its capacity to overcome inequalities in social background. In the United States and UK, more of the vocational learning takes place in labour markets (Schindler et al., 2024, p. 45). Tholen (2015) contrasts student experiences and perceptions in the UK and the Netherlands. For many Dutch students, with a clear vocational pathway, the transition to work is a personal trajectory. British students are conscious of ‘a relatively unregulated labour market and a competitive higher education system … they believe that journeys into the labour market are decided by external forces’ (pp. 773–4). In positional markets, opportunities are diffuse, everyone is a competitor, and exclusivity and distinction matter. Students are ‘searching for external signals that define what constitutes “an employable student”, which changes (p. 774), adding to the ambiguities and anxieties of the transition from education to work.

The marketized pre-labour nature of Anglo-American higher education helps to explain why an abstract generic approach to employability has policy traction. It appears neutral in relation to university status and can calibrate the market of institutions: employability as a public good, congruent to and serving

the market, as Samuelson (1954) imagines. As will be discussed, states in the Anglosphere work hard to hold an abstract universal form of employability in place, radically simplifying and forcefully quantifying it in homogenizing terms. Because the abstract universal approach to employability is context-free, it is ambiguous, which helps to explain why employability, however bold and blunt the metrics, is slippery and elusive. It is hard to achieve in practice. It never seems to be clear and stable.

Understandings of employability

As was discussed in Chapter 4, education and work are very different social spheres with distinct tasks, rhythms, subject positions and social forms. Relations between them are endemically fragmented (Marginson, 1993b; Roksa and Levey, 2010). The transition to work is complex and can be protracted, although some students study and work in career jobs at the same time. Regardless of the complexity of education-work relations, after the 2008–2010 financial crisis, it seemed that in many countries, graduate employment and employability became increasingly important, and more so after the late 2010s.

Graduate labour market outcomes and graduates' ability to successfully navigate the jobs market are increasingly emphasised as a key, if not *the* key, contribution of higher education, and individual financial returns on degrees have become a core measure in global institutional rankings, an accountability tool, and a mechanism of governance in many higher education systems. At the same time, ensuring higher education institutions provide a steady supply of 'work ready graduates', equipped with the skills demanded by employers, has become a significant driver of higher education and wider tertiary policy. (Robson, 2023, p. 177)

Likewise Cheng et al. (2022) state that despite the fact that it 'increases consumerism culture and commodification of higher education' (p. 25), there is a consensus that 'employability is core to higher education' (p. 17). The triumph of employability has been conditioned not only by neoliberal education markets and individualization but also the intensification and precariousness of work, job churn, career mobility and the rise of the gig economy (Brown et al., 2020). 'New flexible modes of work shifted the burden of risk onto the individual. Entering and navigating such a precarious space is increasingly seen as requiring a diverse range of skills (employability skills) to equip individuals to manage their own career trajectories' (Robson, 2023, p. 181). Individualizing employability has enabled governments and companies to shift responsibility

for jobs and careers onto the graduate, and onto the universities with an open-ended duty of education and care (p. 189).

The hegemony of employability discourse has also been secured by universities acting in their own interests. As before with the discourses of equality of opportunity, human capital and the global knowledge economy, institutions have mimicked the employability assumptions and requirements of government. The discourse empowers them and connects them to core constituencies. However, as with the equality of opportunity discourse, in running with employability, they have bought into bottomless expectations and in the longer run are doomed to fail, with effects that accumulate and eventually undermine their social standing. No institutions can create graduate jobs at scale. Only top-tier institutions can consistently demonstrate relatively strong employability outcomes for most of their graduates.

Definitions. Cheng et al. (2022) nominate three kinds of definition of employability. The first is pure individualization without reference to externalities. It solely emphasizes the graduate's own capabilities: 'personal assets or intrinsic characteristics' (p. 18), which can include achievements, skills, knowledge, capabilities, attitudes, understandings. In mainstream policy, skill-based concepts are widely used. These are critiqued as limited, less than fully autonomous and reflexive, in more nuanced accounts. Tomlinson (2017a) advocates 'forms of graduate capital' including human capital, social capital and cultural capital and also 'psychological capital' (resilience, self-efficacy and adaptability) and 'identity capital' (including work-related identities and personal investment in work) (p. 340). The focus on individual capabilities highlights the absolute qualities of graduates. This parallels human capital theory, which assumes labour scarcity and does not inquire into the take-up of labour and its translation into productivity (see also Chapter 4). 'Successful employment and employability is seen simply as a matter of getting the education right' (Robson, 2023, p. 183). However, as Robson notes, the supply-side conception is true for only some people in some jobs, some of the time (p. 190). By no means all such employable labour is employed appropriately. Because the normative orientation of employability discourse is to successful adjustment in the market, absolute definitions of employability seem to beg the question.

Hence the second approach acknowledges labour market determination. This is 'the relative definition of employability' (Cheng et al., 2022, p. 18). It does not assume labour scarcity. This approach forks between two normative paths. The mainstream definition aligns with employers. Employability is about 'how well the individual can adapt to the demands of the labour market' by investing time, effort and/or money in better equipping themselves (Tholen, 2015, p. 767). The

alternate critical definition maps the external structural forces and contextual factors affecting graduate outcomes (Cheng et al., 2022, pp. 18–19). For example, a critical study of employability can focus on the chances of obtaining and holding a job for graduates with differing socio-economic backgrounds, gender, nationality, ethnicity, field of study and institution attended. Here, there is scope to highlight inequalities and discrimination; to unpick tensions, conflicts and relations of power in the workplace; and to investigate the social construction of employability itself (Tholen, 2015, pp. 770, 772).

The third or ‘dual’ type of definition encompasses both the absolute and relative dimensions (Cheng et al., 2022, p. 19); for example, the capacity to navigate the labour market while taking into account both employer requirements and external structural conditions and constraints. Pham (2021), who like Tomlinson (2017a) takes a capitals approach, combines the specific capitals into the ‘agency capital’ of the proactive graduate. Agency is understood in terms of responses to structural factors. This takes the autonomy of the graduate as far as possible while remaining locked into the limits of the labour market.

Employability and knowledge

However, if employability discourse is hegemonic, a fundamental problem is its poor fit with the academic core in higher education, consisting of learning and teaching through immersion in disciplinary knowledge, and the associated research and scholarship (see Chapter 1). The purposes of employability do not overlap with the purposes of higher education curricula except in work-related segments of professional and vocational programmes. That in itself is not a problem: higher education normally carries out heterogeneous functions. However, the logic of employability, in conjunction with its elevation to the overriding purpose of higher education, requires all student formation in the different fields of knowledge to adapt to a single homogenizing framework in which knowledge as such is rinsed out. It is a case of one square peg and multiple round holes.

Reflecting on student learning in two disciplines, chemistry and chemical engineering, Ashwin (2024) notes that in the mainstream employability discourse, graduates’ engagement in ‘disciplinary and professional knowledge’ is underplayed. ‘Graduateness’ is not about knowledge per se but about how graduates use their knowledge to engage with the world (p. 10). However, in contrast with what graduates actually do with knowledge at work, employability discourse drops knowledge as such altogether at the point where engagement

with the world of work begins. It emphasizes 'knowledge-blind' generic skills, as if communications, teamwork and problem solving are the same in all fields (p. 2). They are not. Ashwin argues that 'these generic attributes are empty once they are separated from the disciplinary knowledge that gives them meaning' (p. 4).

Cheng et al. (2022) go further: 'Putting employers' need above the purpose of subject knowledge creation will change the nature of higher education' (p. 26). They see 'a discernible shift from the provision of traditional education which is discipline and pedagogy oriented to vocationally focused provision which trains students to demonstrate their instrumental values of knowledge-for-use'. With employability skills being developed inside programmes, the purposes of universities 'to foster innovation and develop subject-specific knowledge' could be displaced (p. 26). Wheelahan and Moodie (2021) state that framing the curriculum in terms of generic learning outcomes, graduate attributes or homogenized employability skills weakens the internal structure of academic disciplines (Bernstein, 2000).

Micro-credentials and Job Ready Graduates

Wheelahan and Moodie (2021) note that this deconstruction of disciplinary knowledge is taken further by micro-credentials (p. 221). These break up professional training programmes that were originally developed holistically into discrete 'parts of an occupation', 'using the workplace as the organising principle, not the system of relations within disciplines and applied disciplines'. Micro-credentials are accumulated, reassembled, and 'stacked' into fuller academic qualifications in which the order of acquisition is irrelevant (p. 222). Prospective students are invited to read the labour market and choose micro-credentials likely to constitute saleable knowledges or skills when they complete. The short duration of micro-credentials facilitates these market-responsive behaviours.

Micro-credentials are endorsed by the European Commission and UNESCO (Ergin, 2024) and promoted by the OECD. In a speech in London in March 2023, the OECD director for education and skills, Andreas Schleicher remarked that life for universities is 'actually very comfortable. You bundle content, delivery, accreditation – you can get quite a nice monopoly rent'. But micro-credentials give employers 'better signals of what people know and can do' (Morgan, 2023). The former head of the OECD's Centre for Educational Research and Innovation, Dirk van Damme, has questioned the continuing expansion of participation, pointing to 'graduate underemployment, overqualification, mismatches, and

substitution effects'. He argues that 'most promising seems to be the rapidly expanding interest on short programs and non-traditional certifications such as micro credentials' (van Damme, 2023).

Like the UK government, Australia is a world leader in inserting generic vocationalism into discipline-specific higher education. Since 2020, 'graduate outcomes' have been 'the most important factor under the performance-based funding model for universities' (Pham, 2021, p. 22). That year, Australia adopted a 'Job-Ready Graduate reform package' (Molla and Cuthbert, 2023; Australian government, 2024b), with funding for higher education and training institutions to develop micro-credentials. Micro-credentials are also multiplying in US community colleges, and, more slowly, in the universities (Hopper, 2024).

'Revaluation' in the UK

The UK's policy focus on 'employability' was long in the making. The 1997 Dearing report recommended that universities enhance graduates' 'employability skills'. Two decades later, employability programmes were becoming essential to all higher education institutions.

Cheng et al. (2022) review UK documents on employability produced by different stakeholders. Government emphasized the responsibility of higher education institutions, and unlike its European counterparts, said little about factors in the external environment that affected graduate employment. 'By ignoring the social, political, cultural and personal elements that are key to employment success, the government are absolved of their responsibility to address these externalities in relation to employability' (p. 26). Higher education institutions emphasized the individual attributes of graduates, said little about external conditions, and followed the government's expectation that they, the institutions, had the main responsibility. Student unions exhibited no clear patterns. Employers focused on work readiness in generic skills like communications, teamwork and problem solving, rather than the practical and vocational skills named by other groups. All agreed in excluding the government from responsibility for employability (pp. 20–5). UK responsibilization downwards had been effective, with institutions and graduates positioned in the main roles.

In the UK's Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) assessments of institutions, the metrics included student satisfaction survey data and graduate salary data, enabling comparisons between institutions and between disciplines. Graduate salary data became potent performance indicators in policy and public

debate. The UK government accessed data on average salary returns associated with degrees (e.g. Belfield et al., 2018a; Belfield et al., 2018b), enabling market comparisons between institutions and fields. Using such data, the *Review of post-18 education and funding* (Augar, 2019) found that ‘a minority – but a significant minority – of university students are left stranded with poor earnings and mounting “debt”’ (p. 65). Low graduate earnings reduced the proportion of tuition loans that were repaid, at public cost. The report asked the Office for Students to intervene in courses seen to be of low value and floated a possible ‘cap on the numbers admitted to courses that persistently manifest poor value for money for students and the public’ (p. 101).

Through these moves, the social value of programmes became equated with market value measured by graduate remuneration. Relatively low-paid professions that contributed to collective social provision, like care work and nursing, were now defined as ‘poor value for money’. Though they contributed to public good by providing common services, they constituted public bads in terms of market-valued employability and the costs they imposed on the student loans system. The concept of ‘low value degrees’, the negative of employability, came to colonize debate, shaping the expectations placed on institutions and academic faculty (Davies, 2023, p. 8).

In 2024, the Office for Students’ conditions for institutional registration and eligibility for student loans required 75 per cent of students to complete their course, and, within fifteen months of completion, 60 per cent of graduates ‘in professional employment’, further study, caring for someone, travelling or retired. In the 2024 election, the Conservative Party promised to ‘close university courses in England’ that left students worse off than if they had not attended university (Willetts, 2025, pp. 36, 38). Cheng et al. (2022) critique employability targets based on the proportion of graduates in employment. Employability is the potential to gain a job, not the job itself; universities are not the sole determinants of employment; and such measures ignore ‘the external factors that may shape a person’s employability and … the relative and dual dimensions of employability’ (p. 19).

The effect of comparisons based on ‘value for money’ was to stigmatize the arts and care work, to a lesser extent nursing and the humanities, and also participation by students from low-income backgrounds – and by inference, the government’s widening participation policy. Institutions associated with relatively low average earnings and ‘graduate-level’ employment were disproportionately located in poorer regions and typically enrolled large numbers of first-generation higher education students. As noted, graduate labour market

returns are correlated with social background. The UK's employability agenda had collided directly with the equity agenda, and increasingly, the former displaced the latter.

In a sweeping analysis of the political currents affecting Anglo-American universities, Turnbull et al. (2024) find that neoliberal states adopted more nationally interventionist economic strategies in the second half of the 2010s, exhibiting a reduced faith in the automatic operations of neoliberal quasi-markets in higher education. As policy makers saw it, marketization coupled with university autonomy had fostered the expansion of student numbers and the multiplication of university activities, rather than productive efficiency and focused alignments with labour and product markets. Student choice had maintained enrolments in arts and humanities programmes that were seen as of doubtful economic and cultural-political value. When universities took entrepreneurial initiatives, this generated more demands for state subsidy (pp. 3, 7–8). In the changing setting governments, and the university leaders who adapted to government, became more willing to close down programmes seen as marginal to economic development. The low value courses rhetoric in the UK, the benchmarking of industry-determined skills within an employability agenda, and Australia's Job-Ready Graduates are all examples of this 'revaluation' of higher education (pp. 8–11).

The change in state strategy coincided with a conservative revaluation that opposed the further widening of participation in higher education in working-class areas. Advocates of the ceiling in growth argued that family demand should be transferred to non-university tertiary options (Turnbull et al., 2024, pp. 11–13). The data on 'low value courses' offered potent material in support of both the closure of programmes deemed unacceptable to the state, and the downwards rerouting of aspirations for higher education in disadvantaged communities. UK Conservative Party Ministers argued that the long-standing equity policy of fostering aspirations for higher education in fact undermined equity by encouraging students into programmes associated with low earnings. The new kind of individualized public good, abandoning the promise of upward mobility, was education that reproduced the student's class of origin.

Conclusions

Individual rights are a public good that requires both individual agency, and collective social and institutional conditions in which those rights can be

exercised as positive freedoms. What kind of rights are secured by individualized equity and employability in neoliberal society? Each in different ways augments agency, but both fail to tackle the collective conditions that enable agency to flourish on a widespread basis. On the contrary, individualized equity and employability are designed to secure not social transformation but social maintenance and reproduction. The ultimate purpose of these public goods is not to remake social relations or to democratize higher education. Individualized equity policies do not increase the overall probability of individual success, nor does the employability focus augment the overall probability of career success. Neither can gain the kind of structural traction that would lift the prospects of all disadvantaged students or ensure that the average workplace draws more effectively from the potential of graduates.

Neither equity nor employability challenges the widely understood mechanisms that reproduce social and educational inequality, such as the market-reproduced hierarchy of higher education institutions, the unequal scope for family investment in private tutoring, and unequal social capital in graduate labour markets. Hence, the achievement of both kinds of public good is chronically unsatisfactory. This becomes an ongoing driver of popular resentment of higher education and fosters critiques of the sector by both the economic ministries of states and populist-conservatives.

In neoliberal regulation, the sole collective purposes are economic growth (capital accumulation as the master public good), and the fostering of social-political conditions that enable markets to operate. The functionality of individualized equity and employability is confined to the latter. There is no evidence that employability programmes in higher education have increased productivity in the workplace, and lifted aggregate economic growth. Rather, equity and employability legitimate higher education and graduate employment as the master social opportunity framework, while ensuring that neither markets nor governments are held responsible for social justice.

Neoliberal equity, transferred from a more egalitarian tradition, substitutes individual meritocratic progression in place of a more credible public good – the collective good of democratic structural reform in schooling and higher education. In the UK, participation and equity programmes foster agency in the sense of aspirations, and this has been a positive feature even in the neoliberal era. However, the bold attempt to change the rules of individualized competition in UK higher education, operating within the terms of equity as an individualized good while using contextual admissions to artificially change the characteristics of individual student applicants, was destined to fail in the face of unchanged

social structural and institutional hierarchies. Neoliberal equity cannot expand the scale of upward social mobility because of the firm limits to the expansion of superior opportunities in capitalist societies that are becoming more, not less, equal. Social equity is about distribution, and by definition, that is a collective rather than an individual problem.

Facilitating the education-work transition is an essential mission of higher education. Helping students from disadvantaged backgrounds into purposeful work is part of the equity trajectory. However, hyper-focus on individual employability skills at the expense of knowledge-based learning in higher education cannot displace the structural roots of graduate underemployment, and it weakens the formative effects of student learning. Employability is a quintessential market creature that extends Becker (1964), relativizing supply-side human capital by directly subordinating it to labour market forces. It functions as a 'responsibilisation' (Rose, 1999) strategy by transferring the obligation for outcomes from the economy to the educational institution and, above all, to the graduates themselves. Employability has less to offer student/graduate agency than does neoliberal equity. Employability promises skills but downgrades knowledge and fosters dependent forms of agency in which proactivity is channelled down employer-defined and employer-determined pathways. At the same time, employability recycles a sense of crisis and failure in most institutions (all of those institutions whose degrees do not confer pristine positional advantages), and it starts to unwind the long-standing core of higher education, its foundations in disciplinary learning.

Since the late 2010s, the Anglo-American jurisdictions have increasingly shifted the policy focus from access and social mobility as such to employability. In effect, employability, presented as an individual right and a matter of universal quasi-welfare (while concealing the employer dependency and misplaced responsibilization lying at its heart) is badged as the new equity. Employability carries with it considerable rhetorical power: the right to work is deeply and universally felt. However, employability is never presented as an unambiguous right to work because that would impose obligations on the state and employers. Policies of educational employability are never joined to labour market reform, let alone job creation. The move from equity to employability is coupled with the growing view in state circles that neoliberal quasi-markets have incentivized the universities to grow student places in their own interest rather than to meet the needs of the economy (Turnbull et al., 2024). This does not mean that neoliberalism and its values and methods have been abandoned. The goal is still capital accumulation. Neoclassical economic value provides the basic metric.

But states want to bring higher education and research under closer control, as shown also in their growing interventions in cross-border higher education (see Chapters 6 and 7).

Individualized equity and employability regulated by employers are a thin basis for the public good in higher education. This creates a gap in the collective imaginary. There is no guarantee it will be filled by either a cultural renaissance or a revitalized social mission. It is more likely to be filled by culture wars. Populist-conservative political forces do not jettison the idea of higher education for the collective public good. Rather, they implement their own notion of public good by remaking higher education in terms of their own coercively imposed mono-cultural values. They have done so in Hungary, are making sizeable inroads in the United States in the second Trump administration, and would seek to impose a similar public good in the UK if the Conservative and/or Reform parties gained political power. 'Revaluation' on the basis of employability and an end to expanding participation coincides with the 'devaluation' of universities by populist-conservatism (Turnbull et al., 2024, pp. 13–16). This political conjunction is dangerous for higher education, as is further discussed in Chapter 6.

The underlying struggle is about *multiplicity*, an evolutionary achievement of the contemporary university with its ideal of social-cultural-global inclusiveness. Universities that empty out multiplicity will deal themselves out of most of their global relations, their capacity to reach right across their societies, and much of their research (see Part II). Yet both employability as the one overwhelming priority, and populist-conservatism, speak to singular identity; and not just the latter but the former can connect to nativism, as Molla and Cuthbert (2023) note in relation to the 'Job-Ready Graduates' policy in Australia. Both revaluation and devaluation threaten to hollow out the Anglo-American university in the name of dramatically narrowed and narrowing versions of the public good.

* * * * *

This chapter has mostly discussed the system in England while noting similarities in the Anglosphere. Individualized equity rather than structural social reform, and employability as labour market responsiveness, are happening in all Anglo-American countries. US higher education is almost as marketized as the English system and also highly stratified in institutional terms, albeit in a more decentralized manner. Australian higher education closely resembles the English system, especially in its dependence on commercial international student fees, though its university structure is less steeply calibrated, with a large,

robust middle layer of universities. Up the early months of 2025, conservative-populist culture wars played a lesser role in Australia than in England and the United States, but that could change.

The similarities raise the question of whether, in the Anglosphere, a larger public good role of higher education can be retrieved at all, if 'public' is understood as both non-market and state, and encourages the production and distribution of shared collective goods. Chapter 6 explores the deep formative roots of individualism in the West, the question of the possibilities and limits of public good in Anglo-American capitalist societies, especially when 'public' is understood to mean centred on the state, and whether higher education as a common good is more enabling of collectivity than higher education as a public good.

Sovereign Individualism, the State and the Common Good

It is not individuals who are set free by free competition; it is, rather, capital which is set free.

~ Karl Marx, *Grundrisse: Introduction to the Critique of Political Economy*, Penguin, Harmondsworth, 1973, p. 650

Chapter 2 began with the concern that government policies in many countries, especially in the Anglosphere, place 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. The collective benefits for society – the social, public or common good effects of higher education – are being neglected (McMahon, 2018; Marginson et al., 2023). In addition, the broader non-pecuniary benefits for individuals, their self-formation as lifelong-learning humans with capability and agency (Marginson, 2024a), are also neglected.

A further problem is the zero-sum policy logic whereby individual and collective benefits are seen to exclude each other. Yet both pecuniary and non-pecuniary benefits for individuals are positive from society's point of view. The augmentation of graduates feeds a richer relational community, a fact lost when higher education becomes defined as individualized commodities in market transactions. Chapters 4 and 5 expanded on how collective public goods are confined by neoliberal readings of human capital theory, employability and social equity; and by state policy emphases on competition and economicistic measures of value.

Chapter 3 suggested that the concerns of this book are shared, to at least some degree, and with varying clarity, by higher education practitioners, policy makers/regulators and experts in England. However, the question is, how much change to the neoliberal settings is possible? Is higher education's location

primarily in Quadrant 3 inevitable? What might be the basis of an enlarging policy? This chapter explores those issues.

* * * * *

Introduction: Can public good be augmented?

Chapter 2 stated that four primary meanings of the English language term ‘public’ are relevant in higher education: (1) *‘the public good’* as a normative condition of universal welfare, well-being or beneficence; (2) ‘public goods’ as half of a dualism with private goods, as in economics; (3) ‘public’ meaning state or government, as in ‘public sector’; (4) public as an inclusive communicative population, as in ‘public opinion’. The second and third meanings govern policy approaches in the Anglosphere. The first, though difficult to define and practise, is invoked rhetorically. The inclusive-communicative public, referring primarily to civil society, is less discussed in higher education but connects to equity imaginings.

Figure 2.1 in Chapter 2 defined four ideal types of liberal political economy at the national level. In the neoliberal era, education and research activity tends to be transferred by governments from Quadrant 2 (social democracy) to Quadrant 3 (state-controlled quasi-market) and sometimes, Quadrant 4 (fully commercial markets). The state in the Anglosphere presses as much higher education and research as possible into Quadrant 3.

Despite the times, public good has not disappeared from Anglo-American higher education. But it is practised more freely on the local scale, in the contribution of higher education to communities, and on the global scale, especially through research and knowledge (see Chapter 9), than it is practised on the national scale, as summarized in Figure 2.1. Where the nation-state is strongest and most determining, there the contributions to the public good are weakest. Those contributions have been dramatically narrowed by neoliberal governments following the Samuelson market formula. Anglo-American governments have no genuine commitment to egalitarian policies designed to bring high-quality higher education to all.

Three questions

Having made the long neoliberal journey away from the welfare state and open-ended collective public good in higher education, can societies and polities in

the Anglosphere recover the broad role of higher education in fostering public good and specific public goods? Can societies in the Anglosphere achieve a more balanced liberalism like, say, the social democratic Nordic systems? Or will high-fee consumer markets continue to define Anglo-American higher education, while Anglo-American states become more arbitrary and interventionist, piling coercion on top of neglect, as Chapter 5 discussed?

This chapter sets out to answer three questions in turn:

1. *Why is there such emphasis on the individual*, and individualized pecuniary benefits, vis-à-vis interdependent social relations, in Euro-American societies and especially in higher education policy in the Anglosphere?
2. Can societies in the Anglosphere strengthen public good(s) in and through higher education by *augmenting the role of the state*?
3. Can concepts and practices of higher education as a *common good* advance non-pecuniary outcomes, including collective outcomes, more effectively than higher education as a public good?

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: 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 proactive 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 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). Individual agency and social structure are ontologically distinct, co-existent and causally joined in sequences

(Archer, 1995). Neither individual 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 to imagine an autarkic individual separated from social relations? How can the English state focus only on individualized pecuniary benefits in higher education?

Euro-American (Western) individualism is the topic of a vast discussion. The Protestant Reformation was grounded in self-responsibility for salvation and material prosperity (Weber, 1905/2002). Colonialism offered riches without limit to buccaneers outside the law and morality. In the Enlightenment, Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1755/2009) imagined a natural individual prior to social relations. The French Revolution was said by critics to foster an 'individuality' that would destroy 'the commonwealth' (Lukes, 1973, p. 3). For nineteenth-century romantics, each person had unique sensibilities. The self-making individual is now a staple of social theory. But the question is not about the autonomous individual *per se*, which takes many different forms and is by no means necessarily antagonistic to social relationality. It is about the Western and Anglophone obviation of social interdependency and the collective good.

This lacuna is so fundamental as to suggest it is older than the Reformation and the Enlightenment. There is a shared social imaginary (Taylor, 2004) in which self-referencing *sovereign individuals* ignore their social conditions and their obligations to others. How did this happen? In his final period which investigated the care of the self and self-formation, scattered across various texts, lectures, transcribed seminars and notes, Michel Foucault (2005; 2011; 2020; 2021; also Fruchaud and Lorenzini, 2021) developed a novel explanation for the genesis of Euro-American individualism.

Foucault on the Western 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, the community of the elect, that was the reward for the faithful. In this mental journey, the actual human society became externalized, separated, in relation to the self. The result of this deeply

felt and momentous separation was that in Western settings, with society now externalized 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. Being an external authority, it was more readily set aside. Correspondingly, 'the critique of established morality' became couched as an assertion of 'the importance of the self' separated from that established morality (p. 13). That is, 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. It constituted an alternate social order. But as individual responsibility for salvation took hold, quickened by Protestantism, the capacity of the church to institutionalize individuals weakened. This released a recurring pattern of rebellion against externalized social authority that targeted both state and church. When Western activists critiqued established morality, the critique was undertaken in the name of the importance of a self-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, when modern Euro-American political cultures were born. In the emerging liberal order, the centrepiece was the sovereign individual. Political freedom and economic freedom were seen as enabling each other: there were different takes on which was the primary cause, but the individual was the constant. For Immanuel Kant, the individual secured freedom from determination by following 'self-made laws' (Svarverud, 2010, p. 206). Foucault's argument explains how the liberal democratic polities were shaped on one hand by the revolt against the externalized authority, and on the other hand by the ill-defined normative primacy of the individual without social obligations. 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.

'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). All Euro-American societies separate the individual from the social to some degree, with varying levels of tension, though individual-social-state relations differ. Nations in the Anglosphere are at one end of a spectrum between hardline pro-capitalism

and liberal social democracy. In the Anglosphere, the sovereign individual stands taller than in other Western settings ('I did it my way') and freedom to accumulate capital is primary to other forms of freedom: political, social, cultural and intellectual.

Political cultures in the Anglosphere

It was not always the case. In the British Enlightenment, Adam Smith was determined not only to constrain the feudal state but to enlarge the space for civil association (Smith, 2002/1759) as well as the market (Smith, 1937/1776). All political cultures are heterogeneous to a degree. Polities in the Anglosphere were and are affected by socialist, communitarian and other currents, home-grown and from Europe. In the United States, Roosevelt's New Deal facilitated an interventionist federal government that advanced further during national mobilization in the Second World War. In the UK, Keynesian liberalism advocated state economic intervention to overcome the macro-market failure that created the Great Depression. After the war, labourist social democracy created a welfare state in the UK, with a universal Nordic-style National Health Service and nationalization of key industries.

However, from the mid-1980s, led by United States President Ronald Reagan and UK Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher, neoliberal market fundamentalism was installed at the heart of the Anglo-American state (Marginson, 2016a). The sovereign individual standing alone like an Ayn Rand colossus was much the largest figure in the neoliberal landscape. The sole rationale of the state became to optimize the conditions for individual capital accumulation. In this setting, public sector production was an obstacle to be removed, or alternately, an opportunity for capital accumulation via privatization. Welfare state features were largely dismantled, except for income transfers to persons (these were protected by electoral politics). Anti-statism and resistance to taxation became standard political tropes, especially in the United States. Still, alongside the sovereign individual, the neoliberal state was potent within its formal limits, especially in the economy, where it firmly positioned the individual colossus within the circuits of capital.

As noted, neoliberal economic policy assumes methodological individualism (Lukes, 1973; see Chapter 5). Remarking on social media during an academic symposium on the problem of 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. As Foucault stated, questions of social order and individual social responsibility boil down to conformity (or not) with the law, as was apparent in the Covid-19 pandemic. It is not just the primacy of the sovereign individual but a particular sovereign individual, *homo economicus*, the self-realizing economic agent, facilitating capitalism:

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 sets the possibilities and limits of the public good in Anglo-American higher education, unless the state and the institutions make a determined effort in the manner of, say, the Nordic polities with their focus on equality. It naturalizes the idea that universities and research serve not society but an economy of sovereign individuals (including graduates) who maximize their capital accumulation. The fatal flaw of Anglophone and, to a degree, other Western societies is the way that 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' becomes 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.

Higher education and the social. Hence a key challenge and obligation of the agents of higher education in the Anglosphere is to push back hard against the model of students as a self-interested consumer whose only obligations are to themselves as individuals, and instead foster in student learning a recognition of the essential collective interdependency of people with each other and with nature (Stein et al., 2020). 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?

In any society, relations of power pre-structure the potential of the shared public good. The diversity of claims on the public good does not take the form of flat pluralism. It is articulated through a class and capital hierarchy in which social and political fractures are inevitable, collective relations are fragmented, and powers to move resources and shape public agendas are unequal. Even in ecology, where the common problem is very obvious and the case for immediate collaborative action is overwhelming, in many countries, powerful interests consistently block the possibility of cross-class and cross-sectoral action.

In capital-based economies, notions of social good vary on the basis of socio-economic position. For example, in higher education systems stratified in value, elite families invest privately to maximize their odds of entering the leading institutions, where poor families are largely excluded. For elite families, the public good lies in protection of the stratified system with its private opportunities. For poor families, it lies in egalitarian reform that renders institutions similar in resources and status, so that little is gained by investing privately.

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

Given that 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?

In the Anglosphere, this possibility is stymied by the primary rationale of the neoliberal state, as discussed in Chapters 2 and 5: maximization of capital accumulation. It seems impossible for Anglo-American states, whatever their political party composition, to implement higher education policy outside the gravitational pull of pre-existing economic and social-class hierarchies. This is apparent in the way that widespread electoral opposition to neoliberal agendas has never translated into a fundamental change in policy; in higher education in the favourable access to prestigious universities enjoyed by elite families; in the unquestioning integration of higher education into economic policies focused on capital accumulation that position institutions in the ‘global knowledge economy’ (Dale, 2005); and in the way states intervene directly to secure a focus

on employability which plays directly to the interests of capital regardless of all the other values and objectives of higher education.

States across the world have spent three decades institutionalizing policies and regulatory systems designed to secure the contribution of higher education and science to national economic prosperity and global competitiveness (Australia was an early case of thoroughgoing neoliberal reform: see Marginson and Considine, 2000). Universities are modelled as self-managed and partly self-funded corporations, focused on the student-customer and the industry-user. Institutional autonomy is regulated by competition and performative regimes in which the state shapes behaviours. The extent of neoliberal economic embeddedness (discursive and instrumental) varies, but the bottom line is that in this framework, higher education is a servant of capitalism, and via its embeddedness in the state is beholden to strong players in the economy. (In China, the configuration is different to Euro-America, the economy works for the party-state not vice versa, but the impact in higher education is similar to the extent that the sector is positioned in a national discourse privileging economic accumulation.) The main focus of policy on research is its contribution to profitable innovations, and the main focus of policy on education is graduate employability.

Even in the Nordic jurisdictions, where higher education institutions are willing instruments of social democratic agendas, economic ministries are agents of capital, and in the last decade have introduced selective neoliberal reforms in higher education. The changes are modest by comparison with the transformation in the UK, but have fostered competition between institutions, and performance regimes, and full fee tuition for cross-border students in Finland and Norway (Valimaa and Muhonen, 2018; Brewis, 2025).

This embeddedness in economic policy and the interests of capital imposes limitations on individual student learning, knowledge formation, and the collective contributions of higher education, in all of the countries affected. If the public sector in higher education genuinely accepted an obligation to serve the general good, it would be an output maximizer, constrained only by the boundaries of time and materiality. However, the neoliberal Samuelson formula pulls the public sector back into the marginal economic world of scarcity, competition, zero-summism and the prioritization of the capitalist-economic over the social-collective. Neoliberalism always closes down – makes safe for capital and renders harmless – the open potentials of state-sanctioned collectivity with its scope to modify economic markets. This reduction has become closely

attuned to Anglo-American political culture. Popular scepticism about claims by the state to embody the public good readily aligns with state reluctance to create Nordic-style obligations for itself. Both factors empty out the potential collective contributions.

In sum, in neoliberal regimes, the outer limit that constrains state-determined public good in higher education is in the interests of capital. Though state policy is miscellaneous, incorporating competing agencies, interest groups, social agendas like access and fragments of old programmes, this plays out within the political logic of the capitalist economy.

Marx was right. In thoroughly capitalist societies like the United States and UK, the general interest is an illusion. When the state fashions a ‘universal’ public good in higher education amid the multiple agendas, that public good is not general but particular. Capital sets the limits of possibility, the state is the guarantor of capital, and state-embedded universities cannot permanently set aside the state. Why has the state in the Anglosphere been so firmly locked into the interests of capital in the last four decades? That invokes larger historical issues than will be explored here, but the mechanisms of control are visible. Capital shapes politics and policy directly through political donors and lobbyists of government (Reich, 2022; Monbiot, 2024), the power of the privately owned tabloid media to discipline politicians in the UK, and the purchase of individual US politicians through the funding of election campaigns.

Beyond neoliberalism

Because the neoliberal project fosters autarkic individuals, other state-oriented projects compete to fill the gap in collectivity, with differing implications for higher education.

Populism-conservatism. As discussed in Chapter 5, the populist turn to nativism, singular national and individual identity and regressive social values, discarding social liberalism, constitutes a sustained effort to fill the gap in collective values by shaping a distinctive approach to public good. In the culture wars in higher education and research (Davies, 2023), populist-conservatives critique universities in the name of blood and soil patriotism or an older collectivity sourced in religion and the patriarchal family. The enemies are feminism, fluid gender identity, global cosmopolitanism and critical anti-racism (especially in the United States), including the naming of white supremacy. The goal is to mobilize the state to de-authorize the university executive and suborn

the epistemic independence of faculty as the starting point for rewriting student formation in the curriculum and autonomous science in research.

Far-right populism and traditional state-centred conservatism differ but can agree about universities. Both deeply reject social democratic agendas and all cosmopolitan inclusion, domestic or global, and global worldviews (see Chapters 7 and 11). Both are less concerned than neoliberal states about whether higher education fulfils knowledge economy agendas, and they do not deify student consumers. Their goal is a state-led imposition of public good as a conservative moral order, grounded in an enforced singularity in national, racial and gender identity, while obliterating autonomous curricula and research. In populist-conservative regimes, the non-vocational humanities can survive, but only by jettisoning critical theory and adopting a singular nativist and gender identity. Populist-conservatives are more interested in the socialization and subjectification functions of higher education (Biesta, 2009) than are neoliberals. Unlike many governmental advocates of employability programmes in higher education, populist-conservatives take seriously the knowledge-formation role of the sector.

Nevertheless, Trump's United States, Orban's Hungary and Putin's Russia demonstrate that in the hands of populist leaders, the classical conservative tropes can be rendered compatible with sovereign individualism. Putinism draws neoliberal economic and social values together with patriotism and traditional conservatism. His regime is strongly supported by the Orthodox Church, underlining its conservative credentials. The Russian state rests on an oligarchy of state-sponsored capitalists, emphasizes individual self-responsibility, and unambiguously empties out collective welfare. It promotes blind loyalty to the state, ultra-patriotism, hostility to foreigners, and traditional Christian values, including the repression of LGBTQ+ rights. Putin has suppressed both free civil order and academic freedom in the universities. In Hungary, the Orban government has legally prohibited gender studies in state-regulated universities, an example much referenced by US populist-conservatives.

The situation in the United States was discussed in Chapter 1. As noted, populist-conservatism made early gains in Florida, whose governor banned critical race theory and diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) hiring and enforced the wholesale restructuring of one private university, at the cost of academic freedom, triggering an exodus of faculty from the state (Udesky, 2024). Then, in early 2025, the second Trump administration began to implement a larger version of the strategy at the national level, starting with leading private universities. Aside

from direct prohibitions, such as closing down federally supported climate science research and the banning of EDI references in government hiring and research, the Trumpian state's principal means of control was to cancel or threaten the research funding of individual institutions, forcing them into coercive negotiations on a one-to-one basis (Helmore, 2025). While at the time of writing the populist-conservative strategy had much further to run, and was being resisted at Harvard and in multiple court actions, it was apparent that the Trump administration might remake the relation between the US state and higher education, undermining Humboldtian institutional autonomy and academic freedom. The state's attack on the independence of science, which previously was seen in Washington as instrumental in the post-1945 US hegemony, showed its indifference to the knowledge economy argument. Trump had no evident concern for either free inquiry or the attraction and retention of talent.

Synergies between revaluation and devaluation. As discussed in Chapter 5, Turnbull and colleagues describe the populist-conservative political strategies as 'devaluation' of the university, designed to wholly deauthorize university leaders, curricula and research agendas, in contrast with state-driven 'revaluation' that subordinates higher education to economic policy agendas, or is pitched at halting the growth of participation. Turnbull and colleagues (2024) note that in the UK Conservative-led government of 2012–2024, all of the revaluation and devaluation agendas were on the table, the government selectively drawing on them at will while also moving in and out of support for both liberal university autonomy and neoliberal governance and performativity. The UK government 'balanced' university autonomy against neoliberal tropes of competition between providers, quality and choice for students and 'value for money', while also adopting the populist-conservative driven regulation of free speech on campus designed to legitimate conservative activism (p. 14).

As Chapter 5 suggested, there are potentials for synergy between revaluation and devaluation. For example, devaluing populists tend to endorse the state-sponsored critiques of higher education's performance on employability that support revaluation arguments. Both sets of strategies are pitched against institutional autonomy and academic freedoms in higher education. The advocates of both see themselves sweeping away cosmopolitan intellectual agendas, especially in the critical humanities and social sciences, and in the case of populist-conservatism, also sweeping away cosmopolitan social agendas. While revaluers value STEM disciplines as hard knowledge with economic potential, the devaluers are less committed to science (many want to deauthorize it) and more focused on the ideological and political potentials of higher education.

But significantly, both the revaluers and the devaluers take their critiques and demands for change into the academic core. Whereas conservative devaluation aims to capture the core for its own politicized agenda, economicistic revaluation deconstructs its academic character.

The underlying issue is what happens in the spaces where knowledge is produced and disseminated; whether the multiplicity of mission and identity, including the scope for critical studies of society, can be sustained. It is easier for universities to accommodate revaluation than devaluation (Turnbull et al., 2024, p. 13). The agenda of populist-conservatism is more devastating for universities, and especially for the global role of science (see Chapter 9). The pressures to add generic employability skills to the curriculum do not imply a wholesale cleanout of leaders, faculty and courses, nor the elimination of climate research. Most institutions in the UK and Australia have accommodated versions of the revaluation agenda, while containing or sidelining the subversive potentials of micro-credentials. Yet revaluation states are driving the employability model harder than before, and like devaluation, that model ultimately suggests a negation of the continuous inner culture of the university.

These developments underline the point that state-determined public good as such is not necessarily democratic or egalitarian (and certainly not non-capitalist), and at worst can signify a cultural uniformity that suppresses multiplicity and free intellectuality. 'Public good' is not normatively positive in itself. For example, when an aggressive country invades a peaceful neighbour, with great loss of life and destruction of infrastructure, as is the case with Russia's invasion of Ukraine, this constitutes public good in both Samuelson's economic sense (warfare is non-rivalrous and non-excludable) and the sense of public as state sector, though not public good in the sense of universal welfare. The political trajectory of far-right populist conservatism leads to the combination of strong state, economic liberalism, evacuation of social liberalism, and the suppression of free knowledge and higher education, apparent in Russia, Hungary and now the United States, in the name of state-sponsored public good.

Prospects of higher education

The climate-nature emergency may trigger a shift towards a humanist collectivism that is grounded in grassroots communities, cooperating to manage shared problems such as rising sea levels and food, water and energy security. It could also condition 'strong-man' politics, weaker democratic forms and/or the fragmentation of states into warring localities. Regardless, social structures,

especially capital and class, set limits to the political prospects. If there is steep class stratification, in societies that are driven by individual aggrandizement and capital accumulation, any enhanced cooperation is likely to be temporary.

However, in higher education with its relational knowledge system, its organizational semi-autonomy and its multiple social connections and contributions, there are larger potentials for collective approaches than in most parts of society. While in competitive higher education sectors broad-based agreement on shared public good agendas is exceptional and can be hard to hold in place for long, the exceptions are important. The Covid-19 pandemic triggered shared medical research and public health agendas within countries, and cooperation between countries despite geopolitical tensions. The climate-nature emergency has fostered much collaboration between scientists worldwide. The networked collaborative forms of science lend themselves to ongoing cooperation across borders (see Chapter 9). Nevertheless, the fuller potential of higher education in public good requires a political change in Anglo-American liberalism sufficient to (a) weaken the class power of economic capital, freeing more space for collective approaches, while undermining the economic basis of far-right populism and social conservatism; and (b) build support for collective social goals, including relativization of the sovereign individual by social and ecological interdependence. Recognition of social interdependence is crucial. Without it, there is no prospect of a Western curriculum that fosters a more collective outlook in *all* disciplines and fields of training. These issues are further discussed in Chapter 11.

Can higher education as a common good serve better?

If, without a major shift, the capitalist state in the Anglosphere is unable to constitute broad multiple public good in higher education except in exceptional moments – and if highly regressive forms of public good can be pursued under the banner of the state – are there other kinds of ‘public’ configurations more likely to enhance non-pecuniary individual and collective outcomes? What of the notion of higher education as a common good?

Like ‘public good’, the term ‘common good’ has multiple associations. It has a long pedigree in the Euro-American West, including Aristotle, for whom the Greek term was *koinon agathon*. ‘A politics of the common good was often contrasted with corrupt government and the pursuit of narrow self-interest’ (Jaede, 2017, p. 1). On the other hand, appeals to the common and

collective are made by authoritarian regimes that negate freedoms and suppress minorities. This makes it essential to devise a common good that combines interdependent collective relations with respect for individuality, nurturing freedoms in the collective (p. 5). As noted, the United Nations Declaration of Human Rights (UN, 2024) effectively combines individual rights and duties to the community.

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 like grazing land open to unrestricted use inevitably become congested because individuals lack 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 shared resources using negotiated protocols. In any case, 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 the public good. Public good is said to be trapped in a limiting economic framework, and unduly state-focused, and says nothing about production and distribution. UNESCO's common good, more political than economic, addresses 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 and Townsend, 2007, p. 24). There are always differing interests in play, but recognizing, fostering and working with diversity has educational, democratic and social benefits. As with public good there is no single common good, but 'the uncertainty and contest regarding its meaning should not prevent individuals or communities from trying to act for the common good or from developing a politics in which the common good, conceived always as contested plays a central role' (Mansbridge and Boot, 2022, p. 1).

The common good is perennially contested because debating how we think we ought to act, collectively and individually, often requires debating the meaning of the common good. The unsettled, contested nature of the concept is part of the unsettled, contested nature of politics ... one does not need certainty about the meaning of the common good to act for the common good rather than self-interest when trying to live ethically. Living with such uncertainty is

required today if widespread commitment to the common good is to help solve pressing collective action problems and generate the mutual trust necessary for efficient and, more importantly, for moral interaction. (Mansbridge and Boot, 2022, p. 12)

The common good approach emphasizes negotiation and shared decision-making, and education that prepares communities in deliberation and implementation. UNESCO common good is fulfilled by private as well as public organizations and entails endemic public-private cooperation. Nevertheless, working with the UNESCO idea, 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 6.1 distinguishes the common good idea from the overlapping but distinct idea of public good. The common good idea shares some of the strengths and weaknesses of the normative-universal public good discussed in Chapter 2, though there are also differences. Both terms carry moral overtones and suggest shared virtue (Jaede, 2017, p. 6). Mansbridge and Boot (2022) argue that the common good 'tells us ... what can justify state action', and is also 'a concept that tells us when we ought to forgo self-interest and act public-spiritedly' (p. 10). That too is similar to normative-universal public good, though with common good there is more emphasis on community in civil society. 'In contrast to the common good, the concept of public goods does not convey a sense of commonality among a group of individuals' (Deneulin and Townsend, 2007, p. 32; Jaede, 2017, p. 5). At the same time, as with the normative public good, when used rhetorically the term 'common good' can be vague and vacuous.

Again as with public good, the definition and realization of the common good faces obstacles in societies grounded in sovereign individualism, capital and class and a structurally guaranteed differentiation between winners and losers. Will not states maintain a primary commitment to national capital accumulation, which reproduces this differentiation, and corrupts the potential for a common good separate from self-interest? Here, a key difference between the public good and common good approaches is that the common good as developed by UNESCO (2015) and others is based on local political mechanisms that can draw broad-based communal support, negotiate diversity, transform normative common good into specific policies and reforms, and manage the production and distribution of shared outcomes. While neoliberal government tends towards the evacuation of central state

Table 6.1 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: 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 emphasizes equitable distribution
‘Public sphere’ as a 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.

obligations without empowering the grassroots, the collective common good approach offers to take responsibility and address and solve problems. The common good is in the long lineage of local and communitarian democracy, often with an educational strand (Dewey, 1927). While cooperative local democracy alone is not enough, it provides a medium for building bottom-up pressure on top-down states in the thrall of capital.

Mariana Mazzucato (2023) argues that common good can be progressed in capitalist societies, if it is pursued at all of the local-regional, national and global scales. She contrasts the common good approach with Samuelson and Ostrom. Both, she says, are trapped in the same conceptual framework, with options structured by rivalry/excludability binaries, so there is ‘either market failure or state failure’ (p. 9). On one hand, Samuelson’s public good focuses not on creating public goods of value but on supplementing private markets in areas

of market failure. 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 individualized 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 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’ (Mazzucato, 2023, p. 2). Mazzucato focuses on the collective character of common good, supplied only to whole communities yet individually shared by their members (pp. 2–3). However, while emphasizing local communities in collectively determining and producing common goods, she states that pro-active government is also needed, that ‘promotes and nurtures co-creation and participation’ (p. 10), oriented to ‘collective goals’ (p. 9). She advocates partnerships between state, business and civil society.

The common good framework ‘is not about enforcing top-down or centralized regulation, but about letting collective processes inform public policy and transnational governance’ (Mazzucato, 2023, 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). Mazzucato extends the common good to the global scale (Chapter 11).

The idea of ‘public value’ needs more development, and Mazzucato might be optimistic about the scope for common good politics in capitalist society, in the absence of at least some cultural movement from sovereign individualism to interdependence. But she is right about the superiority of the common good concept vis-a vis-public good (see also Tian and Liu, 2019). ‘Public good’ and ‘public state’ together are top-down and ambiguous, and contaminated and residualized by Samuelson’s public goods notion. While in the Anglosphere

the obstacles to a more collective policy are formidable, the common good is a stronger starting point for activism.

How might the common good be assessed and understood? The ultimate test is contextual. The common good of higher education is a matter of negotiated collective judgement. The role of observations, and where appropriate metrics, is to inform judgement not determine judgement. Table 6.2 suggests domains that may be open to useful measures.

Table 6.2 Examples of metrics to inform judgements about higher education as common good (NOT an exhaustive list)

DOMAIN	STRUCTURAL FEATURE	MEASURES
Educational participation	Inclusion of the youth age-cohort	Proportion of age-cohort (1) enrolled, (2) completing, at each level of study.
	Distributional equity of participation	Proportional enrolment in general, and in differing tiers of higher education, by socio-economic category, region, race, gender, etc.
Institutional stratification	Extent of inequality between tertiary institutions	Gini coefficient of resource holdings in the higher education system.
	Mobility between institutions with differing missions/status	Proportion of enrolment entering from other tertiary institutions, by type of institution. Proportion of enrolment in combined courses across two tertiary sub-sectors.
Contributions to national government	Research and advice on policy, regulation and related matters	Number of reports generated.
Contributions to local city/region	Employment creation	Number of local jobs that can be directly traced to the operations of higher education (i.e. avoiding implausible multipliers).
	Research and advice on policy, regulation and related matters	Number of reports generated.
	Research	Number of research papers co-authored with local government, NGOs and industry.
International understanding	Engagement with higher education in other nations	Proportion of students who spend study time abroad during their programme.
	Language learning	Proportion of students learning a non-native language during their programme.
	Research	Number of research papers co-authored with international collaborators

Source: Author.

Conclusions

This chapter posed three questions for investigation. Its answers are as follows:

First, why is there an undue focus on individualized pecuniary benefits in higher education, especially in the Anglosphere? While the marketization of higher education has historical conditions (the triumph of neoliberalism and weakening of social democracy), its bedrock is the dominance of sovereign individualism in the liberal imaginary. From this follows the dim recognition of the collective conditions of social relations, and in capitalist societies, the elevation of individual capital accumulation to the ultimate meaning of life. The hard truth is that societies in the Anglosphere may require a climate-nature catastrophe to jolt them into understanding their interdependency. This creates a difficult policy landscape for higher education institutions. However, higher education institutions and people can push a little ahead of their states and societies, by pursuing more collaborative relations themselves. In contrast with business firms, universities do not *have to* be selfish and competitive. Education and research are relational and naturally collaborative. Most institutions have some scope for independent action (it varies by country, resources and prestige), especially in research and global activity; and individual faculty, disciplinary networks and student organizations have more freedom than do 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? The fact must be faced that the contemporary Anglo-American state, in contrast with some other states, is captured politically by the leaders of capital and focused on their accumulation projects. Neoliberal policy control, orchestrated by Treasury departments or their equivalents, is largely complete. Electorates simply cannot secure the desired changes in policy sufficient to reground collective services and abolish poverty, including higher education systems that provide universal education of high quality. States are too deeply embedded in support for capital accumulation to consistently pursue multiple and open-ended non-pecuniary outcomes in higher education. This has emptied out the English language meanings of 'the public good', shrinking the collective domain to the residual 'public goods' permitted by neoliberal economics, without even state financing for all of those. To sustain its defunding of higher education, and the imposition of exceptionally high student fees, the Anglospheric state proceeds as if most collective outcomes

of higher education do not exist. Waiting for a change in top-down policy is not going to work. Something more bottom-up is needed.

Third, can higher education as a common good, rather than as a public good, advance the non-pecuniary outcomes? To retrieve the larger contributions of higher education, it is necessary to start over. A language for non-pecuniary activity is needed that has clear and robust concepts. 'Common good' is a fresh approach that is associated with more collective social relations, distributional equality, local negotiations and bottom-up implementation. The common good strategy counters the capture of top-down state machinery by capitalist interests and neoliberal economic methods. 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 policy, and in the long run might help to detach the machinery of state from the interests of capital.

Bottom-up collaboration alone is not enough to sustain collective outcomes. A common goods politic needs to be networked across localities: cooperation between them is key. The harder challenge is to build sufficient pressure on capital-captured states so that they provide material support for the common good approach by platforming society-wide cooperation between regions, public infrastructure and business; negotiating Mazzucato's (2023) public value in place of economic value; guarding the common good against private capture. Public common goods refer to this kind of state support. The common good idea is also a starting point for interdependency at the global level, as Chapter 11 will discuss.

Central states machines are not the whole of the social, and all sectors have partial scope to shape distinctive organizational personalities and fashion their own trajectory. Higher education in the Anglosphere has a choice. Does it set as its horizon of possibility a few steps up in the *Times Higher Education* ranking? Or does it regroup on the basis of its multiple social missions and its vast potential to augment both individuals and collective social relations? The present policy economics cannot grasp that potential: it is nowhere near understanding it, and never will. It is hard to break the mould, but the higher education 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.

* * * * *

Part I has looked beyond what C.B. Macpherson (1964) called ‘possessive individualism’ to higher education’s potential contribution to non-pecuniary individual development and collective social outcomes. It has discussed public good and common good in higher education primarily in the Euro-American West, mostly in the Anglosphere. However, the meanings of ‘public’, ‘common’ and the public/private distinction and the near equivalents in other languages (Yang and Chen, 2024) vary worldwide on the basis of political culture. National systems of higher education differ in their individual/social balances, in the extent to which they see themselves producing market goods, in the collective goods they expect from institutions, in their philosophical understanding of the relational ‘public’, and in the aspects of higher education that receive political attention and state regulation. The public/private balance of costs differs markedly in systems broadly similar in cultural terms (OECD, 2024).

Once the comparison is broadened to include jurisdictions in the Chinese civilizational zone, in multiple India and other countries that do not share or fully share the Western liberal heritage, a larger variation becomes apparent. Part II discusses global multipolarity in higher education, and the associated diversity in missions and the understanding of outcomes, including ideas of public and common good (Marginson and Yang, 2022; Yang, 2022). It does so within an international and global setting which is in upheaval, shaped by geopolitical conflicts and disrupted by bordered nationalism and nativism. In some quarters, global cooperation in higher education and science is now seen as a danger that should be eradicated. What is the path to the global common good through the splintered mosaic of nation-states, quarrelling over bits of the Earth? Part II explores the problems and possibilities of global higher education.

Part Two

Sovereign Nationalism, Geopolitics and Decolonization

Globalization and the Geopolitics of Higher Education

What is different about our time is that globalization forces us to live all jumbled together, and yet we have very different visions of what this common world should look like.

~ Bruno Macaes, *The Dawn of Eurasia: On the Trail of the New World Order*, 2018, Penguin, p. 2

Part II takes the discussion to the global scale and explores global space and space making; the dynamic expansion of cross-border higher education activities in the 1990s and after, including global science, global inequality and hegemonic relations of power; and the growing multipolarity and cross-border and geopolitical tensions after the mid-2010s. Though higher education was always partly international and global, in the last thirty-five years, global relations and activities have impacted it with greater immediacy and force, without reducing the structural capacity of nation-states in the sector.

Common global systems have upsides in the way they facilitate communication and cooperation, and downsides when they suppress diversity and distributed agency. Some institutions and nations have pursued global agendas without regard for reciprocal interests or the common good. The decline of Western (primarily Anglo-American) domination opens space for others but at present there is no new basis for global coordination, while arbitrary nation-state interventions in the global agendas of persons and institutions have increased. Global common good in higher education is a burning question, but one that is hard to answer.

* * * * *

Introduction: A more global reality

Though social relations determine technologies and not the reverse, some technological changes are so profound that they transform the conditions of possibility almost overnight. After the advent of the internet in 1989, the truism 'higher education is international' had a new poignancy. Streams of messages, information, images and data began to flood in, at first nearly all of it in English. Online relationships began to flourish. For those in Euro-American higher education with access to bandwidth and computing power, a small group growing at an exponential rate, the possibilities seemed endless. Universities elsewhere also found there were new possibilities for action and creation, but they faced normalizing standards and requirements. The loss of control over time and the displacement of customary language and codes of behaviour diminished agency. The geopolitics of higher education had suddenly shifted to a more immediate Western hegemony.

More than three decades later, that hegemony is fragmenting, the geopolitics and the patterns of global openness and closure are different and the internet has proven a mixed blessing for all parties, but the decisive shifts of the early 1990s are still salient. Knowledge and information continue to converge in the global scale, bringing political and educational cultures into direct and continuous contact with each other while sharply highlighting their differences. Global/national tensions are endemic while felt in differing ways from location to location. While there is much scope for agency and innovation in the global scale, the distributions of resources, the protocols and the relations of power are asymmetrical: there is abundant global hierarchy and inequality. Because individuals and institutions are both nested in nation-states and active in other geographical scales, they are caught up in the upheavals of global geopolitics.

This chapter is about space making; individual, institutional and national agency and collective relations in higher education and knowledge; the interstate and global architecture and configurations of power; the transition from neocoloniality and Anglo-American unipolarity to global multipolarity and developing decoloniality; and the flows and ebbs of globalization; topics that continue through Part II. The next two sections theorize ontology, space and scale, and geopolitics in higher education, drawing on human geography and primarily Doreen Massey (2005). This is the basis of the descriptive account that follows: world order and globalization in higher education and research, in two main phases. First, Anglo-American hegemony and sweeping openness after 1990, which leads to multipolarity and the rise of China. Second, the Western

pushback against globalization and partial disruption of cross-border student flows and research cooperation from the mid-2010s onwards.

Space and space making in higher education

Higher education is practised in space and time in which human imaginings and practices intersect with material coordinates, and space is constructed as *social* space and relations of power (Lefebvre, 1991; Massey, 2005). Space in human geography differs from space in physics or engineering. Geographical space is not an already-existing container, static and waiting to be filled, like an empty stadium. It is in motion and continually constructed by human agents. Massey describes each person's life as a trajectory moving through time. Those trajectories intersect, deliberately and accidentally, in space. Space is composed of interactive relations between people, individual and collective, structured by materiality. 'If time unfolds as change then space unfolds as interaction' (p. 61) and as events (p. 28).

Understanding of social space begins with ontology. Reality exists independently of our perceptions of it, but our interpretations and practices are part of reality. Reality is never fixed or finished but continually emerging. Universities, nations, knowledge and the world are always becoming. There are multiple possibilities and the future is unknown, for *both the actual and the possible* are part of reality. Over time, all certainties crumble: Massey (2005) refers to 'the variable essence of things' (p. 58) and 'the mutuality of chance and necessity' (p. 117). This does not mean anything can happen. The possible is conditioned by materiality and history, including capital and class (Sayer, 2000). Nevertheless, it is crucial to grasp the conditioned openness of space in which lie ongoing potentials for new action and events. 'It is that liveliness, the complexity and openness of the configurational itself, the positive multiplicity, which is important for an appreciation of the spatial' (Massey, 2005, p. 13).

Social space is always incomplete. Spaces in higher education from the immense global to the intimate local are co-constituted with the human and organizational agents (themselves continually emerging) who make them. Social space is not pre-existing or natural. It is the outcome of often strenuous and prolonged human effort.

Following Lefebvre (1991), relational space making in higher education combines (a) pre-given historical-material elements (structures) like geographical territories and localities, resources, institutions and networks, with (b) the imaginings and interpretations of space making agents, and (c) the

social practices in which they bring their visions into material form (Marginson, 2022d). For example, a global network of universities joins real institutions in grounded locations. The coordinates are material, but the joining is social and entails many possible imaginations and practices. Figure 7.1 simplifies and summarizes the process.

The material domain 1 includes pre-given *structures* such as economic resources, institutions and systems of institutions, communications networks, laws, regulations, policies, languages of use. The lower two domains 2 and 3 especially embody individual, group and organizational *agency*. In domain 3, agents rework material elements from domain 1, using ideas and interpretations from domain 2 to build new activities, programmes and organizations in higher education: embedded material practices that become reproduced as ongoing structures in domain 1. Imagination in domain 2 and social experience in domain

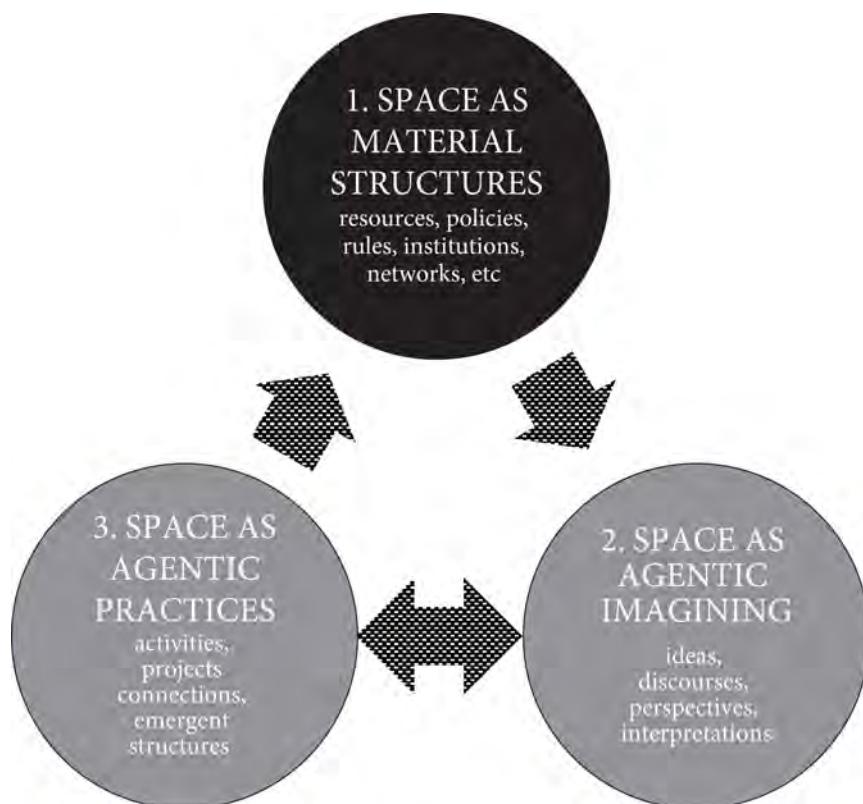


Figure 7.1 Space making in higher education as materiality, imagining and social practices.

Source: Author.

3 shape each other in a continuing reciprocal process, analogous on the social scale to Archer's (1995; 2003) duality in the mentality of each person: the social self and the inner self in continuous reflexive conversation (Marginson, 2024b).

Many examples can be given of space making in higher education. The governmental construction of educational quasi-markets in Quadrant 3 (see Chapter 2) is a thoroughgoing space making project on the system-level scale. More modestly, individual universities sign agreements, make alliances, create joint degrees in a local region or across borders. Singapore positions itself as a 'global schoolhouse' in a 2002 report of the Ministry of Trade and Industry, selects foreign universities to invite in to set up branches, and recruits foreign researchers to staff its labs. A Chinese university planner and a London-based magazine in 2002 and 2003 imagine a university world ordered by calibrated rankings of performance (see below). Governments in Japan, South Korea, China, Germany, Russia and more start to build layers of 'World-Class Universities' that network into innovating industries, facilitate global research partnerships and build status for the nation. EU and ASEAN countries establish regional recognition protocols that facilitate student mobility. Western universities set up branch campuses in East and Southeast Asia and India. Faculty at the University of Manitoba in Canada in 2008 create a MOOC (Massive Open Online Course), a globally inclusive mode of broadcast delivery, free of charge, capable of video and interactive elements. Researchers reach into each other's systems, collaborating in projects and academic writing. Millions of students apply for foreign university places, fill out visa forms, buy plane tickets and cross the border. All are making relational social space in higher education.

The certainty of multiplicity

Massey (2005) argues against notions of space as static and stable, of a closed world always-already divided up; notions of spaces and places internally coherent and bounded without reference to changing externality (pp. 5, 6, 26, 49, 151); notions of identity and agency as fixed and singular, apportioned to specific geographical places in unchanging landscapes and with an 'isomorphism' between space/place and society/culture (p. 64). 'So many of our accustomed ways of imagining space have been attempts to tame it' (p. 151). In the face of all the openness the impulse of scholars and politicians is to order the chaos, to derisk the open ontology of the temporal, 'both its terrors and its creative delights' (Massey, 2005, p. 26). They want a place or home that provides certainty, a safe haven (p. 65). But over and over, the impossibility of stability is apparent. Nothing stays still

for long. Space emerges and alters, new trajectories and intersections and gaps appear, and when people finally go home they find that it has been changed out of recognition. All strategies that try to hold down the moving parts by discourse or by force 'evade the challenge of space as a multiplicity' (Massey, 2005, p. 61).

Arguably, along with the open ontology itself, *multiplicity* is Massey's most important insight, one that is repeatedly apparent in higher education. Clark Kerr's (1963) central idea was that the university had become the 'multiversity' (see Chapter 1). Higher education and knowledge, like all of human society, turn on 'the co-existence of difference' (Massey, 2003, p. 3). This is difference in all the senses of multiplicity, including 'diversity, subordination, conflicting interests' (Massey, 2005, p. 61). 'The pertinent lines of differentiation in any particular situation' can vary (p. 12, emphasis in original). Space is the sphere of 'co-existing heterogeneity' where the trajectories of agents intersect. It *must* entail plurality (p. 9).

Difference is not confined to levels or calibrations of the same quality that are generated by internal decentring, as in university rankings, though hierarchy is one of its forms. Multiplicity is also about the qualitatively distinct, and the differentiating effects of external relations on inner phenomena (as in the diversification of national university systems on the basis of their varied global activities). Multiplicity is heightened in global relations, with no global state to homogenize identities. Globalization is 'a shared historical process that differentiates the world as it connects it' (Gupta and Ferguson, 1992, p. 16). 'Even the new hybridities formed at points of intersection and juxtaposition are just as much a product of the dissonances, absences and ruptures within the process of globalization as of any simple increase in the building of interconnections' (Massey, 2005, p. 100).

Whether control is exerted through language, knowledge, university hierarchy, capital, military force, a *permanent* homogenizing uniformity with no gaps or loose ends is impossible, especially in the global scale. 'There are always loose ends' (Massey, 2003, p. 5). Those loose ends include the human and organizational agents who shape space. Multiple trajectories mean multiple agents with multiple perspectives and projects: 'governments, higher education institutions, business, and international/regional organisations' and 'students, faculty (whether individually or as a collective), civil society' (Moscovitz and Sabzalieva, 2023, p. 155). While some individual trajectories may have a discernible rationality, no one can be sure what will happen when the trajectories intersect.

Not all scholars agree with Massey about the primacy of difference. Pieterse (2020) sees differentiation and universalism as twin 'drivers' of human affairs (p.

235), each giving way to the other in succession. Marston et al. (2005) state that 'complex systems generate both systematic orderings and open, creative events', but the systematic orderings tend to be more common. Variations cluster and become mimetic over time, they state (p. 424). Yet some gaps, some differences, do not close into identity. If ontology is open and trajectories intersect, then uncontrolled emerging diversity must have the final word. It is fortunate that it does. 'Conceptualising space as open, multiple and relational, unfinished and always becoming, is a prerequisite for history to be open and thus ... for the possibility of politics' (Massey, 2005, p. 59).

The inexorable fact of social (and cultural, and political) diversification over time, which is equally evident in the natural world, ought to cure social science of its long struggle to find universal patterns and iron law causal explanations, its addiction to equilibrium as rest, and its longing for the security and status of true prediction, the promise it can know the future by extrapolating from a frozen present. 'Through many twentieth-century debates in philosophy and social theory runs the idea that spatial framing is a way of containing the temporal. For a moment, you hold the world still. And in this moment you can analyse its structure' (Massey, 2005, p. 36). But the structure is not still, and it turns into something else.

If the theoretical critique is not convincing, then empirical observation will suffice. In higher education, the certainty of multiplicity shows in the inevitable diversification of fields of academic knowledge, a common trope of higher education research. It was apparent in the variety of global initiatives by mostly Anglospheric universities in the first fifteen years of the internet (Marginson, 2011b). It means the field of power is also fluid and no singularity of content and no system of domination survives unchanging: few things are more certain than that homogeneous English-language global science will eventually pluralize (Chapter 10). It shows in the multipolarization of global political economy, and higher education and knowledge. Arguably, how diversity is configured and practised is *the* question in higher education space. Part II will return repeatedly to multiplicity and it is central to the final Chapter 11.

Scales and higher education

One kind of multiple space with special geographical importance is *scale*, like the local, national or global. Scale is 'a produced societal metric that differentiates space' (Marston and Smith, 2001, p. 615). Like other spaces, scales combine the actions and imaginings of agents with material structures and their coordinates.

Scales differ in scope, proximity, coordinates and the associated imaginings and social relations. Active scales include the planetary or world scale, which combines human society and nature (Chakrabarty, 2021); the global scale, human society at world level; the pan-national regional scale as in the EU (Robertson, 2018); the national scale; the sub-national region scale, including the city; and the local scale, which in higher education includes the institutions, the disciplinary unit or research centre, and the student organization. There is also the individual scale (Marginson and Rhoades, 2002; Marginson, 2022d; Moscovitz and Sabzalieva, 2023, pp. 154–6).

Though the ‘social ownership’ of scales is ‘broad-based’ (Marston and Smith, 2001, p. 615), there is varying recognition, especially of the regional and global, and definitions of scales are contested. The national and the local are most prominent, taken for granted, part of common sense, but all scales are fluid and dynamic (Moscovitz and Sabzalieva, 2023, p. 154) and the outcome of continuous effort. For the blood and soil nativist the nation is forever, but in reality all nations are ‘imagined communities’ (Anderson, 2016) held in place by law, authority and coercion, financial power and instruments of persuasion. Likewise, Massey (2005) repeatedly argues against ideas of global space as pre-given and ‘out there’, something external to agency or locality. Like all scales, the global is constructed, concrete and lived (pp. 6, 184–5). Global activities ‘are utterly everyday and grounded, at the same time as they may, when linked together, go around the world’ (p. 7 and p. 53).

Agents in higher education contribute to the formation of scales and also make and utilize space within them (Marginson, 2022d). Large multidisciplinary research universities are active at all scales. Higher education has long worked across scales. The Buddhist monasteries of Northern India, the medieval Islamic madrasas and the European universities were structured by a double spatiality, as noted in Chapter 1. They combined materiality and identity in cities and states with mobility and an open mental horizon. Scholars, students and ideas crossed borders. The double spatiality remains integral to today’s universities, fundamental to their (partial) autonomy and organizational identity. They can hardly not be national, while at the same time the global scale frees them to be something of their own that does not derive from states, and connects them to all other institutions across the world that combine inquiry and learning.

The multiple scales and their variations are not well understood. The nation dominates thought and crowds out complexity. ‘Methodological nationalism’ is ‘the belief that the nation/state/society is the natural social and political form of the modern world’ (Wimmer and Schiller, 2003, p. 301). Through this lens,

worldwide phenomena are generated internally by nation-states, there are no global systems, higher education can be comprehended only in separate national categories, and cross-border activity is marginal (Dale, 2005; Lo and Ng, 2013; Shahjahan and Kezar, 2013). A methodological nationalist lens blocks from sight global phenomena such as ecology and also cross-border science to the extent it is epistemically autonomous. Methodological nationalism is not identical to normative nationalism, whereby one nation is preferred over others (Beck, 2007). Some patriots are aware that lived activity takes place outside the national scale. Nevertheless, the two forms of nationalism do tend to lean into each other, and taken together can tightly border identity. Massey (2005) refers to 'romances of coherent nationhood' and vain attempts to 'purify' the national space (p. 12).

The geo-social scales co-exist and are irreducible to each other. It is crucial to grasp that the scales are *not* identical at varying sizes, with one fitting into the other and the big ruling the small, like the matryoshka, the Russian dolls. They are different in kind. For example, while national science is normed by the nation state and its laws, regulations, policy and funding, global science has no normative centre. It is comprised of knowledge in journals and bibliometric collections, and structured by communicative networks, institutional practices and collaborative relations. There is a worldwide cultural hegemony, but no single driver of science, political or economic. Scientists are active in both global and national-local science, and the norms, relations and behaviours in each case are partly different (see Chapter 9). Scientists are freer when working across borders than in state-regulated national systems, though not all agents can choose the scale of activity.

Relations between the scales, including their causal power in higher education, vary in time and space. In the 1990s the global scale often seemed to be the main source of change in the sector. More recently the potency of the nation-state has been reasserted, though some national spaces are more open than others to cross-border and global effects.

Scales are too large to be owned by single agents. They are the site of differing layers and conflicting projects. 'Globalization', meaning social convergence and integration in the global scale, is the subject of differing claims, from neoliberal markets to decoloniality to global polities (see Rizvi and Lingard, 2009; Robertson and Dale, 2015; James and Steger, 2016; Rizvi et al., 2022; Marginson, 2022c; 2022f). For all its political limits, discussed below, the post-1989 'space of flows' (Castells, 2000) opened a wider window and multiplied the potentials for agentic action, and not just in Anglo-America. Massey cites Stuart Hall (1996), for whom globalization is 'a major, extended and ruptural world-historical

event' that decentres Europe and the colonial (p. 249), so the global South becomes more than a secondary by-product of Europe (Massey, 2005, p. 63). This proved prophetic. The decentering potentials were partly but not wholly suppressed by the US-driven hegemonic and subordinating globalization, as summarized by Hardt and Negri in *Empire* (2001), and decentering resurfaced in the multipolarization of the world order in the 2000s/2010s.

Relations of power and geopolitics

Agents strategize to control space via selective opening, partitioning and closing; and they mix and match scales, working their trajectories in one scale to open new possibilities in another:

What is at issue is the articulation of forms of power within spatial configurations ... The argument about openness/closure ... should not be posed in terms of abstract spatial forms but in terms of the social relations through which the spaces, and that openness and closure, are constructed; the ever-mobile power-geometries of space-time ... What is at issue is the *nature of the relations of interconnection – the map of power of openness*. (Massey, 2005, pp. 93, 166, 171, emphasis in original)

Geopolitics can be defined simply as institutionalized relations of power in the regional and global scales. For Cantwell and Grimm (2018), 'geopolitics involves competition between states': this includes competitions to house the strongest research universities and to attract research talent (p. 134). However, while geopolitics are commonly discussed in terms of nation-states, they are also populated by corporations (Hartmann, 2021), NGOs, cities and universities. Geopolitics especially engage international organizations, though the fluctuating unequal relations between major states are more determining. Further, geopolitics entail cooperation and horizontality as well as competition and hierarchy. They can be win-win as well as win-lose (zero-sum) in form. Geopolitical relations in higher education, especially in science, tend to be more cooperative than are political and military relations between nations; though maybe higher education is even more geopolitically hierarchical and unequal than is the inter-state system.

Massey (2005) shows that like all space geopolitical relations have multiple possibilities. In a world that is a jigsaw of territorial nation-states, many separate trajectories are in the mix. Individual trajectories with their chains of causality

may each seem coherent, but they co-exist, they are ‘intertwined’, and their intersections are causally unpredictable: ‘it is the fact of multiplicity which produces the indeterminacy’ (p. 113). ‘Order and disorder are folded into each other’ (p. 117). There is no reason to assume that heterogeneous national (or university) trajectories that occupy the same moment will necessarily cohere and coordinate (p. 141). Like all space, geopolitical space is only sometimes ordered, through negotiation or domination, and on a temporary rather than permanent basis. Primary attempts to achieve coherence are the hegemonic strategies of the United States, and inter-state (multilateral) negotiations orchestrated by international agencies such as the United Nations (UN).

The scope of international agencies to order global relations is limited by the absolute political sovereignty of nation-states, their inherent tendency to nation-centrism and their indifference to the world as a whole. Except in the European Union, where in some policy domains (e.g. trade, competition, eurozone monetary policy, crime, consumer protection) the European Commission has binding powers to make laws and apply decisions to all members (see Chapter 11), multilateral coherence rests on voluntary consensus between the major powers. This is episodic. When the UN system’s capacity to secure consensus was at its maximum, in its early decades, that capacity was underpinned by US hegemony. Up to now, with the exception of cooperative governance in Europe, geopolitics has not been consciously global except when imperial and controlled from a single national centre.

Zhao Tingyang (2021) comments that ‘it is precisely with the advent of globalization that the limitations of international politics have become patently clear ... As our contemporary world becomes ever more intimate and interdependent among nation-states, a renewed problem of world sovereignty emerges’ (p. 14). The world as a whole is understood as a geographic space of activity, but not also as a single subject in the sense that the nation, the university or the corporation is conceived as an agentic subject. Outside Europe, nations have no necessary obligation to recognize their interdependency or take responsibility for the global:

with respect to the political, only nation-states are deemed significant. It is for this reason that the world has only been exploited as a ‘common’ resource and treated as a domain to be fought over and abused ... This is especially the case within ideologies of hegemonic nation-states, where other nation-states and even the high seas are conceived of as just so much territory to be dominated. (Zhao, 2021, pp. 185, 187)

Global inequalities

Power, domination and equality/inequality in higher education and knowledge are not so much determined by space and time as coeval with them. Consider global mobility. It is mostly articulated by structural hierarchy. There is more than one kind of agentic mobility (physical, virtual) and immobility (chosen and forced); each is associated with differing freedoms and unfreedoms; and individual, institutional and national agents markedly differ in 'capabilities, resources and position in the global hierarchy' (Moscovitz and Sabzalieva, 2023, p. 155). While mobility can enhance agency and vice versa, at a given moment there are spaces which only some agents can enter. The powerful can move almost anywhere while they maintain a secure home base. Virtual relations democratize mobility, to a point, yet some agents lack the rights and the resources for virtual movement, or cannot share knowledge globally because their language of use is marginalized. Fortunate agents in higher education can access government funding for global mobility. Most have only their own resources. South to North migration grows not when people are becoming poorer – ecological devastation or war can fix in place those who most need to move – but when people's capabilities and aspirations are rising (de Haas, 2023). As in national populations, the aspiring middle layers, not the poorest of the mobile, are best placed to invest time and money in foreign higher education and most likely to secure state or philanthropic support.

In short, capitalist political economy and the hierarchies of class, culture, race, gender and knowledge create viciously unequalizing conditions. Agents' solidarity with each other and their understanding of relational interdependency (within and between nations) is incomplete. Massey (2005) remarks that 'there are few spaces less "Euclidean" ... than those of global neoliberalism' (p. 100), and that individual places are unequal in their capacity to shape space. The United States, and the UK, especially London, are places where the 'neoliberal capitalist global' is produced (p. 101). A parallel comment can be made about universities. All respond to globalization but the leading Anglo-American institutions have also been makers of global space in higher education and science.

Yet despite the structural inequalities most agents have more scope for action than they know. All have conscious and reflexive wills and can determine their responses to structural constraints (Archer, 1995, p. 71; Foucault, 2005, p. 133). Once created, new spaces constitute new opportunities. In space in general, and in higher education and knowledge, not even the strongest agents can maintain control forever. Every space eventually 'escapes in part

from those who make use of it' (Lefebvre, 1991, p. 26). So it has been with post-1990 globalization.

Theorizations of the geopolitics of higher education

One theorization of global relations of power often referenced in studies of higher education and science is the centre-periphery model in Immanuel Wallerstein's (1974, 2006) 'world-systems theory' (e.g. Schott, 1998; Choi, 2012; Chinchilla-Rodriguez et al., 2018; Olechnicka et al., 2019). World-systems theory imagines a three-part global space: the Euro-American centre or core, a 'semi-periphery' of weaker Western nations and a few others, and the bulk of the former colonies, immiserated on the 'periphery'. Individual countries are a function of the 'totality' of worldwide capitalist economic relations (Wallerstein, 1974, p. 387). 'There is no such thing as "national development"' (p. 390). Wallerstein's hierarchy is fixed. There is limited 'surplus' at the world level, and for one country to rise, another must decline (Wallerstein, 1976, p. 466). Wallerstein is a critic of Eurocentrism but sees it as inevitable unless or until capitalism is abolished. World-systems theory regards global relations in science as both determined by political economy and difficult to shift (Olechnicka et al., 2019, pp. 102, 105).

However, the last three decades of global political economy, higher education and science have not worked out in Wallerstein's terms. The periphery is not holistically stuck in permanent under-development. The zero-sum surplus is a fiction: many countries have advanced both their absolute and relative position. Chapter 9 discusses the ascent of universities and science in China and Singapore to leading world roles – in his sequence of papers, Wallerstein maintains China in the periphery or semi-periphery – and the rise of scientific output of India, Iran, South Korea and Brazil, among others. World-system theory fails because its rigid spatiality cannot encompass change. Fatally, it assumes the structure of global power in political economy necessarily blocks all autonomous evolution in either the economic trajectories of nations (Smith, 1979) or their higher education and science. In failing to grasp the relative autonomy of the national scale, Wallerstein falls into methodological globalism. In reality, the national scale is interactive with the global scale but not wholly determined by it (Marginson and Xu, 2023).

Antonio Gramsci (1971) has more helpful ideas about geopolitics. For him, relations of power in science, education and other cultural sectors are semi-autonomous in relation to states and the economy, while also contributing to the

overall configuration of power. Gramsci identifies two ways in which relations of power are exercised: direct coercion or force, and hegemony, whereby the ruling class justifies its dominance and wins the active consent of those over whom it rules (p. 178). The state and corporations supporting the state invest in normative processes, including law, schooling, media, publishing, the arts and science and universities. The interests of the dominant group are diffused through social networks and thereby secured in subjectivity and day-to-day conduct. Intellectuals, who articulate universalizing ideas, play key roles in forming hegemony (and also in counter-hegemony). Gramsci (1995) takes the theorization of hegemony to the world level (pp. 156–7), noting the ‘colonial subjection of the whole world to Anglo-Saxon capitalism’ (Gramsci, 1977, pp. 79–82, 89–93), and ‘combinations of states in hegemonic systems’ (Gramsci, 1971, p. 176). His passages on ‘Americanism and Fordism’ highlight the universalizing element in American culture, propagated worldwide in industrial production, mass consumption and ideologies of individualism (Gramsci, 1971, pp. 277–318). The sciences are well fitted for universalization (p. 446). Gramsci seems to anticipate the world order in science that emerged after 1990.

Noting that ‘higher education should not be viewed solely as an educational endeavour, but also as a geopolitical project’ (p. 152), Moscovitz and Sabzalieva (2023) provide a theorization of geopolitics for higher education studies. They develop a ‘scales, agents, interests and opportunity structures framework … a heuristic through which to analyse and critique the intersections of the new geopolitics with higher education’. This can guide empirical investigations by helping researchers to identify the forces at play (p. 156).

Hegemony, multipolarity and conflict

The chapter now turns to the changing world order, globalization and geopolitics and their manifestations in higher education and science over time (see also Marginson, 2011b; 2022a; 2022d; 2024c; 2026). While continually evolving and punctuated by new events, the present is conditioned by an ever-changing mix of layers from the past. Arguably, global circumstances have combined in five successive historical layers (Sakwa, 2023) that continue to shape global relations of power:

1. Euro-American colonization and world domination prior to the Second World War;

2. The 1945 UN Charter, sovereign internationalism and the beginnings of post-coloniality;
3. From 1990, hegemonic neocoloniality under Pax Americana in the political-military realm and the US-dominated globalization in economy, culture and higher education;
4. From the 2000s, growing multipolarity in the economy, higher education and science;
5. From the mid-2010s, part fragmentation and destabilization of the post-1990 order.

Before 1990

At different times between the fifteenth and twentieth centuries, Euro-American (Western) countries ruled, controlled or strongly influenced over 95 per cent of the surface of the Earth, with England and then the United States leading in the 250 years before the Second World War. Colonization is the most fundamental fact of geopolitics. It continues to affect global hierarchy, global flows and global imaginings. It installed an Anglo-American episteme, organizational models, system norms and language in universities, though the idea of the research university itself and what is arguably the deepest Western pedagogy, *Bildung* (Sijander et al., 2012), originated in Germany. A superior Chinese educational culture bequeathed to the West selection by competitive examination, again via reforms in Germany, yet since then, East Asian education has scarcely touched the West. Colonial power was secured not by cultural or linguistic superiority but by military force and coercive economic power. Yet colonization was underpinned by Western assumptions of racial and cultural superiority and a self-defined moral right to lead or rule, attitudes that are still deeply felt.

After the Second World War, the 1945 United Nations (UN) charter in San Francisco began to move beyond coloniality. Following the war and the Manhattan Project, the United States was the strongest single nation, but was allied to the Soviet Union with a different political system; the Cold War had not begun, and there was near universal support for self-determination. The spirit was optimistic, multiple-cosmopolitan, inclusive and tolerant. The central idea of the 'Charter International System' was 'sovereign internationalism' whereby the world was a plural space, tolerant of civilizational differences and diverse political systems. Non-interference in the internal political affairs of countries was respected, provided they abided by shared charter values like the UN conventions (Sakwa, 2023). Further international organizations were created,

designed to enshrine a stable US-led global order with Western norms of economic markets and political democracy: the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund, OECD, NATO, and the General Agreement on Trade and Tariffs which became the World Trade Organization (WTO) (Heather and Rapley, 2023, pp. 36, 70). Nevertheless, most of the newly independent countries remained economically and politically dependent on the old imperial heartland (p. 54). Meanwhile, the United States moved in and out of its multilateral charter obligations, unilaterally intervening in other countries at will.

As time went on, sovereign internationalism in the United States was largely displaced by a liberal anti-pluralist position grounded in American exceptionalism, intolerant of non-liberal regimes (though less so when they were US allies). Sakwa (2023) calls this 'radical liberal internationalism', and it later took shape as the Anglo-American 'rules-based order'. It was never an agreed global standard. It was the creed of a hegemonic bloc whose proponents assumed they were superior in all respects. They assessed all societies against Western norms and supported interventionist strategies based on humanitarian objectives and regime change. This crusading liberalism recalls nineteenth-century British imperialism, which claimed world primacy as its right on the basis of self-defined civilizational standards.

1990–2010s: US neo-imperial hegemony and 'the end of history'

The Soviet Union dissolved itself at the end of 1991 (Zubok, 2021), and for many in the United States, there was no obstacle to worldwide Americanization. Fukuyama (1992) proclaimed Western liberal democracy as the final form of government, 'the end of history'. 'Even at the time, this sounded hubristic. Today, it looks delusional' (Heather and Rapley, 2023, p. 127). Nevertheless, with military primacy and Western support, the US government felt free to pursue a more transformative political, economic and cultural hegemony. Ultimately, post-1990 globalization was to facilitate heterogeneity, confirming Massey (2005), as will be discussed, but in geopolitical terms it began in a neo-imperial and neocolonial form and was grounded in a homogenizing civilizational order.

Hegemonic US-led globalization supported world markets in an open trading regime. This was combined with the cheapening of transport and intensified people mobility, communicative convergence via the emerging internet, and the export of US film, television and cultural forms and ideas in many domains, including universities and science. English-speaking universities moved with special ease in structuring and colonizing the expanding global space: implanting

branch campuses in East and Southeast Asia; fostering partners, university consortia and research links; drawing foreign students and doctoral talent. Higher education became more widely utilized as a medium of upward social-professional mobility via spatial mobility. Student flows from the global South and East were pulled gravitationally to the United States and the UK, the 'whitest of the white' (Shahjahan and Edwards, 2022).

There was more than one kind of post-1990 global space; there were diverse agentic agendas, strategies, trajectories and practices. An expanding open network with porous borders appealed to scientists. For national policy makers, the global was a bordered arms race in talent and technologies. European government and university leaders supported regional integration designed to transcend historical conflict by bringing societies, universities, faculty and students together. Commercial university rankers imagined a single global market in 'world-class universities', facilitating families investing in cross-border education and universities building prestige. 'Social imaginaries circumscribe what is deemed possible or legitimate to think, act and know' (Stein, 2017, p. 329).

At the peak of hegemony in the 1990s/early 2000s, globalization in higher education mostly felt like uniform Americanization but was also something more. Governments and institutions in Singapore, Malaysia, Japan, South Korea, China, France, Nordic nations, the Gulf States and elsewhere took global initiatives, some mixing cross-border education and foreign aid. Globalization coincided with a great uplift in participation rates and the growth of global science in many countries (Chapters 1 and 9), reflecting rising aspirations in populations and states, and expanding economic capacity to support aspirant world-class universities. Even so, autonomous national trajectories were flavoured by the hegemony and its political-economic agenda. Hegemonic globalization entailed the spread of Anglo-American neoliberalism in economic and higher educational policy, including Quadrant 3-style business organization of universities, competition, tuition prices in some systems, and state steering from a distance via product formats, contract-based goals, performativity and audit.

Global spatiality as such was not necessarily neoliberal (Massey, 2005, p. 83; Olssen and Peters, 2005, pp. 313–14). Post-1990 globalization was associated with many phenomena other than free cross-border trade in capitalist markets: it included communicative convergence, science, and expanded educational relations, diverse cultural encounters and new hybrid cultural forms (Rizvi, 2005; 2011). Educators could pursue a globalization soaked in multiplicity without regard for the neoliberal agenda. Nevertheless, their institutions were

also being colonized and remade by neoliberal mindsets, entrepreneurial enthusiasms, expanding world markets and unequal hegemonic geopolitics. In the UK, Australia and New Zealand, and later in Canada, executive leaders in universities nominally devoted to the public good cashed in, building a large-scale commercial industry in international education that transferred capital out of emerging countries and quickened brain drain, in continuity with colonialism. All was justified by a normative would-be universal 'internationalization' which largely meant Westernization (Marginson, 2023) (see Chapters 8 and 10).

National/global synergies. Scientists mostly understood science as global collaboration rather than a geopolitical contest of nation-states, but as long as governments saw benefits in the open global science of researchers, each party gained from the other. Elite US universities subsidized the doctoral training of foreign students at scale and networked with countries everywhere. They worked the relatively accessible US migration regime to recruit global talent, especially graduate researchers from China and India, augmenting US scientific capability and soft power, and their own national standing and global advantage.

UK universities leveraged their inherited status to attract and monetarize cross-border students, substituting international student revenues for declining public financing, saving the Treasury money while augmenting neocolonial soft power abroad. Universities also drew research income and talent through their leadership in collaborative European research and free people movement in the EU (Highman et al., 2023). The top research universities worked the global science system to perform high citation science at the US level while confirming their national position. Australian universities, supported by expansive migration policies on student visas and skilled labour, used global student flows to lift their research performance, not via cross-border doctoral talent as in the United States, but via cross-border flows of tuition financing. By 2019, 32.4 per cent of all students paid commercial international fees, providing 27.3 per cent of revenues (Australian government, 2024a) and financing about one-quarter of university research. Australia, a country of 25 million people, achieved seven universities in the top 100 in the Shanghai Academic Ranking (ARWU, 2025), and equalled the UK in its proportion of science papers in the high-citation category (NSB, 2022). The global rankings sustained Australia's recruitment in the global student market, creating a circular effect.

China pursued another national/global synergy (Marginson, 2018b; 2022a) underpinned by ever-increasing state investment, with spectacular results. Compared to the Anglosphere, there was less global outreach and more national capacity building, but again, activity in each scale strengthened the other in a

circular fashion. Collaboration with United States' universities and scientists built national research infrastructure and global research performance. Rather than focusing on foreign talent, China used state-funded programmes to bring diasporic Chinese scientists back from the West. Between 2003 and 2022, papers with authors in China increased by 13.0 per cent a year, from 88,585 to 898,949 (NSB, 2024), and Chinese universities moved past the United States in high-citation STEM-based research (Leiden University, 2025) (see Chapter 9).

In all these examples of national/global strategy, despite potential tensions between national policy, and global activity partly beyond national control, it seemed that the compatibility of scientific nationalism and scientific globalism (Haupt and Lee, 2021) could be taken for granted. It later became apparent that this happy match was not forever.

The global knowledge economy. The post-1990 themes were neatly parcelled up in the 'global knowledge economy' discourse foregrounded by the OECD and World Bank, which defined human capital formation, science and universities as key to technological innovation, high value production and national competitiveness (Olssen and Peters, 2005; Dale, 2005; Sa and Sabzalieva, 2018, pp. 152, 154). In comparing science policies, Sa and Sabzalieva (2018) note 'a remarkable similarity across countries in embracing this positioning' (p. 156). The knowledge economy spatiality reworked the national/global hinge. First, the national and global scales became more closely combined: 'domestic higher education projects are entangled in the prevailing geopolitical order, notably a hierarchised global higher education space' (Moscovitz and Sabzalieva, 2023, p. 153). Local-national practices had implications for relative global standing, and vice versa. Second, while nations differed in the extent of state intervention, deregulation and commercialization in higher education, neoliberal governance was flexible, and the global knowledge economy was interpreted through national lenses and contextualized with national policies (Sa and Sabzalieva, 2018, pp. 159–60). The scope for substantial variations between systems reduced the frictions of global homogenization.

The cross-country comparison by Sa and Sabzalieva (2018) identifies variations in normative nationalism, in the extent to which global cooperation was read in terms of national interest (p. 161). There were/are also variations in methodological nationalism, in awareness of global science as ontologically distinct from the nation (Zha, 2024, p. 1533).

Global ranking. Over time, the competitive and quasi-capitalist aspects of the global knowledge economy imaginary gained ground in material terms. In the first decade after 1990, there was broad policy consensus that 'while competition

between states was intense', all could be winners in science: there were 'shared geopolitical benefits rather than absolute, zero-sum gains' (Cantwell and Grimm, 2018, p. 133). Then in 2003/2004 the competitive global knowledge economy idea was captured and institutionalized by global university rankings (Marginson, 2014b). In this potent framing of the global higher education space, the logic was unambiguously hierarchical and zero-sum.

The first ranking was conceived by a university planner in China who wanted to use data on comparative research performance to drive improvement in the science output, and the national and global position, of Shanghai Jiao Tong University (ARWU, 2025). This was followed by a business-research ranking developed by the business research firm Quacquarelli Symonds (QS) for the higher education sector magazine *Times Higher Education* (THE) in London, using comparative data that combined surveys of university reputations with indicators of resources and outcomes. Later, the THE developed a new ranking of its own, while QS broke away, maintaining its previous ranking in competition with THE. Both organizations used their web-published ranking (Times Higher Education [THE], 2025; Quacquarelli Symonds [QS], 2025) as a loss leader that drew higher education clients to their business services in the sector. Not surprisingly, university leaders found that they could improve their THE/QS ranking by paying THE/QS for advice on how to do so, and over time an increasing number did just that.

The respective rankings formed a global higher education space in different ways. The ARWU gained its authority from the centrality of research in university status. By foregrounding a research-based hierarchy, it encouraged national investments in basic science and institutional mergers to augment comparative performance, for example, in France. The THE and QS rankings set out to order the 'best universities' in relation to all missions, though actual teaching and learning were not measured, and no collective missions entered the rankings aside from research. The reputational surveys in each ranking recycled reputation as ranking in a circular effect: the goal was competitive status position as an end in itself. Universities could advance their ranking position via marketing campaigns without actually improving real performance, creating a simulated knowledge economy detached from intrinsic education and research. Yet all three rankings normalized all universities in one global higher education space, in which all institutions were seen as equivalent and comparable, competing on standardizing criteria, regardless of their histories and contexts. The criteria were geopolitically unambiguous. The ranking templates were (and are) derived from characteristics of the leading Anglo-

American research universities. All three rankings were routinely headed by Harvard, MIT and Oxford.

Rankings exaggerated the diversity of status while suppressing all other actual and potential multiplicity in higher education. Institutions deviating from the standard template (e.g. those that were discipline specialists, or focused on social missions such as local community building or widening access, or carrying large vocational education programmes not linked to research) were punished in the rankings. 'Excellence Initiatives' to achieve World Class Universities (WCUs), like rankings themselves, steepened stratification in national systems. Rankings installed specific metrics as goals that normalized missions and behaviours, especially in aspirant systems focused on WCU status (Hazelkorn, 2015), locking institutions into models and incentives most would never have chosen for themselves (e.g. for sub-Saharan Africa see Teferra, 2019a). No development did more than rankings to normalize the global higher education space as a universal neoliberal market, while perpetuating Anglo-American authority.

For university leaders, global status ranking was a comparative frame of reference with few winners. The status of non-winners was exposed and reduced, there was bottomless accountability and insecurity, and no control over the rules of comparison or conditions of performance. Yet the global knowledge economy was an asset to executive-style leaders, and not just in the Anglosphere. Though neoliberal systems steered them more closely, in the transition from ivory tower in Quadrants 1 and 2 to business firm in Quadrants 3 and 4, they maintained corporate autonomy, more closely controlled internal academic freedoms, and gained a new legitimacy as CEOs with academic status at the edge of global modernization: doyens of futurity with the progress of the nation in their hands. And in a more unequal global higher education world, many were energized by the corporate opportunities.

It was all of a piece. Nation-states believed that capital accumulation was maximized in a liberal global regime of 'total unfettered mobility, of free unbounded space' (Massey, 2005, p. 81), valorizing every kind of openness, connection and passage. Cross-border education formed graduates for global business. Cosmopolitan cultural inclusion in education optimized market reach. Open science maximized innovation and productivity all round, with talent flowing to the centres best able to profit from it. All was expected (at least in Anglo-America) to foster Anglo-American soft and hard power. Western states were comfortable with global openness because it was Western-dominated, predictable and limited. Academic networks were technically open but culturally closed, by English and the Western episteme, and guaranteed by the Harvards

Table 7.1 Trends in global income inequality, as measured by the Theil index: 1990 to 2010

	1990	1995	2000	2005	2010
Global inequality	0.949	0.918	0.903	0.827	0.723
Inequality between countries	0.734	0.696	0.681	0.600	0.479
Inequality within countries	0.215	0.222	0.222	0.227	0.244

Source: Table by author, original data Bourguignon, 2015, p. 42.

A decline in the Theil index means that inequality has *reduced*.

and Oxfords. In non-Western nations, hegemonic globalization was two-sided, but they did not make the rules.

However, the conditions supporting post-1990 globalization were of their time and not permanent. Once those conditions began to shift, once open global hegemony no longer generated the same net benefits for the agents that drove it, matters would change. ‘The closed geographical imagination of openness, just as much as that of closure, is itself irretrievably unstable’ (Massey, 2005, p. 175).

Multipolarity

During the 2000s the exceptional US dominance began to recede. Global economic capacity became more broadly distributed. Later the emerging multipolarity was apparent in higher education and science. This began to deconstruct the geopolitical conditions of post-1990 Anglo-American globalization as a one world one culture transformation project.

Table 7.1 indicates the dramatic reduction in political-economic inequality between countries after 1990, reflecting state and economy building in the global East and South. The proportion of people living on \$1.25 a day in constant 2005 prices dropped by half (Bourguignon, 2015, p. 42). In the table the Theil index – like the Gini coefficient, the higher the index the higher the inequality – shows a modest increase in inequality *within* countries but a sharp fall in inequality *between* countries, especially after 2000, continuing after 2010.

Between 2000 and 2020 the share of world GDP in constant prices in the United States and EU fell from 43 to 30 per cent. In 2016 China’s GDP passed that of the United States, and by 2022 the combined GDP of China and India was moving towards the US and EU total (see Table 7.2). Further, as Heather and Rapley (2023) note, ‘it is so much more than a Chinese story’ (p. 127). Economic multipolarity included India, Indonesia, Iran, Brazil, South Korea, Saudi Arabia

Table 7.2 Proportion (%) of PPP world GDP at constant 2021 prices: United States, European Union, China, India: 2000 to 2020 and 2022

	2000 \$78.5 trillion	2005 \$94.1 trillion	2010 \$111.7 trillion	2015 \$132.0 trillion	2020 \$146.6 trillion	2022 \$161.4 trillion
European Union	22.2	20.4	18.1	16.2	15.0	15.1
United States	19.8	18.7	16.6	15.7	15.2	15.0
China	6.4	8.5	12.3	15.2	18.1	18.4
India	4.2	4.8	5.6	6.5	7.1	7.5

PPP = purchasing power parity, which standardizes across countries the domestic economic value of income. Source: Table by author, data from World Bank (2025). Data for 2020 were affected unevenly by the pandemic.

and middle economies like Malaysia, Vietnam, Chile, and the Gulf States. ‘In 2019, six of the world’s fifteen fastest-growing economies were African’ (p. 127). The world was transforming.

Multipolarity in higher education. Massey refers to multi-polarization as ‘the arrival of the margins at the centre’ and remarks on ‘the accompanying reassertion of the depth of differences’ (p. 70). Growing political and economic power in the global scale, sooner or later, provides favourable conditions for cultural power, as has happened in higher education and science – though multipolarity has shown itself more in the spread of non-Western infrastructures and the quantity of participation, institutions and published science, than in the diversification of cultural contents. Anglo-American language and institutional models still dominate (see Chapters 9 and 11).

Between 1990 and 2015, China’s Gross Tertiary Enrolment Ratio rose from 3 to 47 per cent; and by 2023, it was 75 per cent, just below the United States’ 79 per cent (World Bank, 2025). The colossal growth in participation was matched by the equally remarkable expansion of science. After 2000, it was increasingly apparent that science was no longer the preserve of the Anglosphere, Western Europe, Russia and Japan. Between 2003 and 2022, while science papers in China grew by 13.0 per cent a year, the annual growth in India was 11.4 per cent, Iran 15.6 per cent, Turkey 7.5 per cent, Brazil 7.3 per cent, and South Korea 6.4 per cent. In 2022, fifty-nine nations/systems published more than 5,000 science papers, compared to thirty in 2003. The 2022 group included a dozen countries where per capita income in purchasing power parity terms was below the world average (NSB, 2024). Table 7.3 shows the dynamic growth in science in the largest non-Western systems. Chapter 9 explores this in more detail.

Table 7.3 Change in output of published science in Scopus, seven largest non-Western systems compared to selected Western countries: 2003 to 2022

Country	Scopus papers 2003	Scopus papers 2022	Change 2003–22 2003 = 1.00
China	88,585	898,949	10.15
India	26,638	207,390	7.79
South Korea	23,880	76,936	3.22
Brazil	17,731	67,001	3.79
Iran	3,907	60,940	15.60
Turkey	13,376	52,658	3.94
Indonesia	387	31,947	82.55
United States	336,491	457,335	1.36
Germany	74,320	113,976	1.53
United Kingdom	77,151	105,584	1.37

Here and elsewhere, Russia (84,252 papers in 2022) is classified as Western, Brazil and Latin America as non-Western.

Note that while established research systems like the United States and Germany typically grow more slowly than emerging systems, the non-Western growth in Table 7.3 is exceptional in historical terms.

Source: Author using data from NSB (2024).

China, South Korea and Singapore emphasized the physical sciences, technology, engineering, computing and mathematics (STEM) because of the role of those disciplines in urbanization, industrialization and global technological competition. China became the largest producer of graduates in STEM (Zha, 2024, p. 1544). In 2022, researchers in China published 228,189 papers in Engineering, compared to 22,897 in 2003, and to 49,437 in the United States and 79,408 in the EU in 2022. Chapter 9 shows that Chinese universities came to overwhelmingly dominate high-citation work in STEM research, with Tsinghua moving to world number one (Leiden University, 2025). While Anglo-American universities still led in medical research, Chinese institutions were making up ground in that cluster too.

Global multipolarity in universities and science is not a normative claim or a theorized speculation, it is a fact, though one under-recognized in the West. The geopolitical shift in science is captured in Figure 7.2. In nineteen years, Scopus papers from non-Western countries moved from 27.7 to 54.6 per cent of the global total. While high-citation science is more concentrated in the West than is total science, researchers, doctoral programmes, laboratories and research collaboration and publication are now broadly distributed.

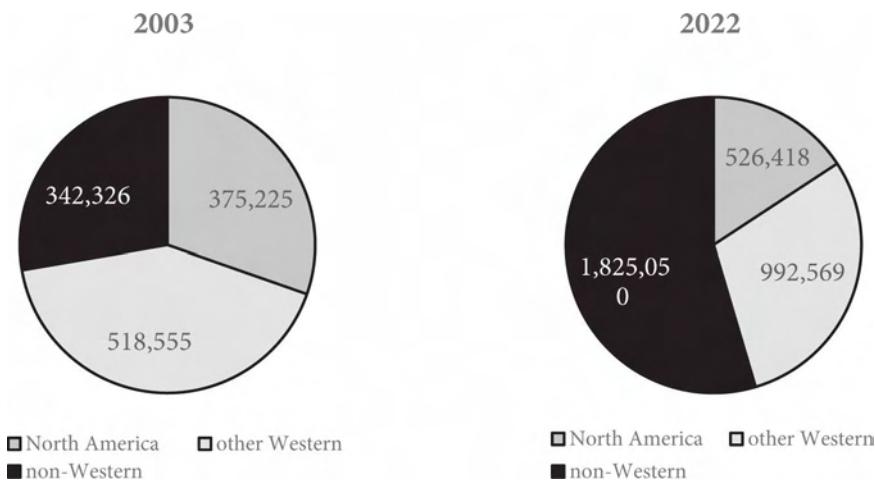


Figure 7.2 Distribution of science papers in Scopus between Western and non-Western countries: 2003 and 2022.

'other Western' includes all Europe including Russia and the European settler states Israel, Australia and New Zealand but not South Africa, Latin America and other former European colonies. Mexico included in 'non-Western' not North America.

Source: Author, using data from NSB (2024).

From the mid-2010s: Partial deglobalization in the West

By the early 2010s, the long economic tide to Euro-American globalization had turned and geopolitical strategists in the United States were reassessing the national-imperial approach (Blackwill and Fontaine, 2024). The United States never acknowledged multipolarity or resiled from its claim to global leadership. Rather, it decided that in order to sustain that primacy, it needed to radically change its handling of openness/closure in global space making. By the first Trump presidency it had abandoned Fukuyama's (1992) hegemonic project, switching from multi-sector engagement with China to geopolitical confrontation in the economy and technology. Given that the global balance of power had rested on US hegemony, and given also the absence of another basis for global integration – such as a global system consistent with multipolarity with distributed power, diversity and negotiated coordination – multipolarity coupled with US bi-polarization led to the unravelling of the global order. This had flow-ons to the destabilization of national politics and national global strategies in many countries.

The West moved from global convergence to bounded nationalism, amid a nativist revolt against migration and cosmopolitan identity, which was the combined outcome of neoliberal immiseration and the weakening of Western (primarily US)

global hegemony. Despite this, cross-border student mobility and global science continued to grow, but the previous global higher education space inherited from 1990 to 2015 became more nervous and fractured. The nativist inspired Brexit in the UK in 2016 was symptomatic: it abolished European student entry through Erasmus mobility while radically reducing non-UK Europeans in UK degrees and faculty recruitment pools (Papatsiba and Marginson, 2025). In much of the West government support for normative internationalization in higher education receded. Universities found themselves dealing with new geopolitical tensions and national/global frictions, growing uncertainties and large-scale disruptions to cross-border student flows, and a new emphasis on risk management in research collaboration.

Non-Western countries were in a different place. They did not share the pushback against globalization, nor the security paranoia, nor the same widespread internal political destabilization. However, their cross-border economic, political and educational relations were affected by the fallout from the change in US space-making strategy, and they found themselves still in an Americanized world. Though the relative GDP of the United States was declining, and politically and culturally it could no longer remake the world in its own image, the US government still had an unrivalled capacity to rework the global space.

Why deglobalization? Recurring alternation between globalization and deglobalization is inevitable. Space is always emerging. Neither composite tendency can achieve equilibrium, and both combine different strands of causation with multiple historical limits. Polarity between openness and closure is an ongoing feature of the US polity which always included both internationalists and isolationists, and long oscillations between geopolitical opening and closing are characteristic of imperial regimes. For example, in both Tang China in the ninth century CE and the Ming dynasty in the fifteenth century CE, a period of open borders and multi-sector engagement was followed by a period of closure and xenophobia.

Zahra (2023) describes how the colonial globalization of 1870 to 1914, sustained by growing trade, the telegraph and exceptional levels of migration into the European settler states, gave way after the First World War to virulent protectionism and import substitution in national economic policy, a dramatic drop in migration, and populist antagonism towards foreigners far in excess of 2016 to 2024. In 1870 to 1914 the shift to deglobalization was worldwide, universal rather than Western regional as in 2016 to 2024. Zahra states that 1870 to 1914 globalization was vulnerable because the main beneficiaries of globalization were economic capital and the upper-middle-class people who enjoyed global lifestyles. Many others across the world then experienced globalization as disruptive, unequalizing and immiserating.

However, though the current deglobalization was inevitable in abstract, the timing and amplitude were not. The causes combined economics, geopolitics and domestic politics.

Economic globalization and geopolitics. After the financial crisis of 2008 to 2010 there were diminishing returns from the globalized economy for both US capital and labour. The growth of global trade slowed, and the economic weight of multinational firms decreased slightly. Countries increased protective tariffs. Western offshoring of production and the average length of supply chains each diminished (*The Economist*, 2019). Many industrial workers in the United States opposed open trade (Rodrick, 2018): in fact jobs lost to automation were mostly attributed to competition from China. This constituency underpinned Trump's wins in 2016 and 2024.

The economic factor in US deglobalization was also geopolitical. US strategy makers concluded that, given the expansion of the Chinese economy to equal size with the United States, China had gained more from global openness, while China's economic success rested partly on the inward transfer of American technologies. They believed that moving to global closure would contain China's rise. Further, China's entry into the WTO and the work of American firms in China had failed to trigger Americanization of the Chinese political system as had been expected. In China, the polity determined the economy, not the reverse as in the United States, and Chinese civilization stubbornly failed to abandon three thousand years of tradition. The belated realization partly explains the abruptness of the US reversal. The same American affect – the transformation of frustrated expectations about systemic convergence into a sense of being used and a breach of trust, coupled with the Manichean rejection of the party-state that revisited the old reflexes of Cold War anti-communism in the United States – showed in both the political-economic decoupling and the techno-scientific decoupling (Inkster, 2020; Heather and Rapley, 2023; Blackwill and Fontaine, 2024).

The pivot to global polarization along Cold War lines, which was a geopolitical strategy of othering and exclusion/closure, relocated global relations from economic goals and trade and financial flows to the military-security domain. There, the United States maximized its advantage, controlled the Western discourse and could discipline its allies and dependencies. However, the strategy was merely negative: coercive rather than hegemonic. In contrast with post-1990 economic globalization, the global military-security space constructed by the US was unattractive outside the West.

Nativism and anti-migration. The symptoms of global multipolarity subverted inherited Western identity. They unpicked the sense of superiority engendered by five centuries of colonialism, triggering cross-class sensibilities in

white Western countries. In one nation after another the political right secured a political advantage by fanning the flames of nativist populism, in polities already part deconstructed by growing inequality and the failure of neoliberal capital accumulation to distribute prosperity, the 2020 to 2022 Covid-19 global pandemic, and the inability of governments to address the climate-nature emergency. Yet Western nativism was triggered not just by multipolarity but by the ideological claims attached to Western globalization. The post-1990 discourse of free movement fuelled 'the sentiments of parochialism, nationalism and the exclusion of those who are different' (Massey, 2005, p. 87). Nativists wanted to 'purify' the national scale in Massey's sense. This response was not 'backward-looking' so much as looking backward to a spatial coherence that had never existed. 'This is a particular form of ordering and organising space' unable 'to acknowledge its multiplicities, its fractures and its dynamism. It is a stabilization of the inherent instabilities and creativities of space' (p. 65).

Hence it was a stabilization of space impossible to achieve in practice. The unachievable norm fostered a perpetual grievance which could never bode well for nations with mixed populations, and for cosmopolitan universities and cross-border ventures. Populists played on fears of downward mobility among those who were struggling. The 2024 national elections in the UK and the United States were contests in working-class communities hollowed out by austerity, automation and global trade. People feared being displaced by outsiders whom they ranked below themselves. Migration resistance cemented deglobalization (Brogger, 2022). Governments believed that to survive they must adapt to the mood, not try to change it. Migration regimes toughened in Germany, France, the Netherlands, Sweden and Finland, and in his 2024 election campaign Trump promise bulk deportations of persons without residential rights in the United States, a process which he set in train soon after taking office. However, governments could do little to reduce permanent migration because low-paid migrants were crucial to the capitalist labour force. When they wanted to achieve demonstrable reductions in migration, they turned to the soft target, international students.

More assertive nation-states. The faltering of hegemonic global control quickened the agency of all nation-states, while the weakening of mainstream ideological support for neoliberal deregulation, the growing internal conflicts and the emphasis on national security encouraged government interventionism in all areas, not only in economic policy (see Chapters 5 and 6). States increasingly focused on their bounded national interests. After 2015, a more strident patriotism was evident in many countries, including the United States, the UK, Russia, China and India, one that slid more readily into methodological nationalism.

The pre-2015 commitment to liberal openness in the Anglosphere and other Western countries positioned universities and researchers as part of the civil order. A global national security space had different implications. In states focused on internal control of anxious populations, it was a short step to problematize cross-border practices in universities. In countries where independent cross-border activities had been tolerated, institutions and their personnel were renormed as more exclusively national agents. Elsewhere it had always been so.

Fallout in higher education and science

Moscovitz and Sabzalieva (2023) comment that 'higher education is undergoing critical transformations as a result of changing geopolitical dynamics. Yet while widespread, these transformations are not uniform' but impact higher education agents in 'diverse and context-specific ways' (p. 151). The effects of the political and geopolitical shifts after 2015 were felt primarily in higher education in the West.

There were unprecedented interventions in international student mobility, beginning with Brexit and Trump's selective bans affecting students from West Asia. Both the Netherlands and Denmark problematized the cost of inward EU students, and Denmark reduced international students in English language programmes in 2021 (Brogger, 2022). Anti-migration politics played havoc with international student numbers across the Anglosphere. In 2023, Canada announced a reduction of 45 per cent over 2024 and 2025 in new international student study permits and the Australian government sharply reduced visas in vocational education. In 2023, the UK blocked most students from bringing dependents, reducing applications by 16 per cent. It was remarkable that nations in the Anglosphere that had built large commercial international education industries over three decades, which became integral to funding domestic higher education and research, could partly dismantle them overnight. In the first three months of the Trump administration in 2025, at least 1,000 international students lost visa rights. Some were detained. Many had been active in protests against Israel's genocidal policy in Gaza but others had nothing more on their record than traffic violations (Guardian staff and agency, 2025). In these developments, neoliberal economic objectives were decisively subordinated to populist nativism. No such constraints affected student mobility into East and Southeast Asia, including China and Japan, underlining the fact that the migration-related drivers of deglobalization were primarily a Western phenomenon.

Ukraine and Palestine. The wholesale Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 transformed the geopolitics of higher education in the region. It led to the complete destruction of higher education in parts of Ukraine (Ivanenko, 2025); many close links between institutions and scholars in the two nations were broken; and there was a large exodus of faculty and students from each. After Russia's university rectors publicly endorsed the actions of the Russian state, formal relations between Russian and Western universities ceased, although some faculty-to-faculty cross-border conversation was maintained, and Russian links with the non-Western university world continued much as before.

In Israel's ethnic cleansing of Palestine from late 2023 onwards, with the political support of the United States, the damage to higher education was greater. At the time of writing it looked unlikely that any higher education institution in Gaza would survive. Some faculty and students entered institutions abroad but many were killed or driven out of education altogether. Palestinian institutions in the West Bank were also under increasing pressure. Israel's army routinely destroyed not just people and buildings but material cultural infrastructure and technological artifacts.

The US/China decoupling. When Trump began the American China Initiative in 2018, US/China co-authorship was the largest collaborative pool in global science (Figure 7.3). In an investigation of highly cited joint papers, Lee and Haupt (2021) show that the United States benefitted more than China: joint projects were mostly in research domains where China was strong, and China provided well over 50 per cent of funding. In surveys researchers in both

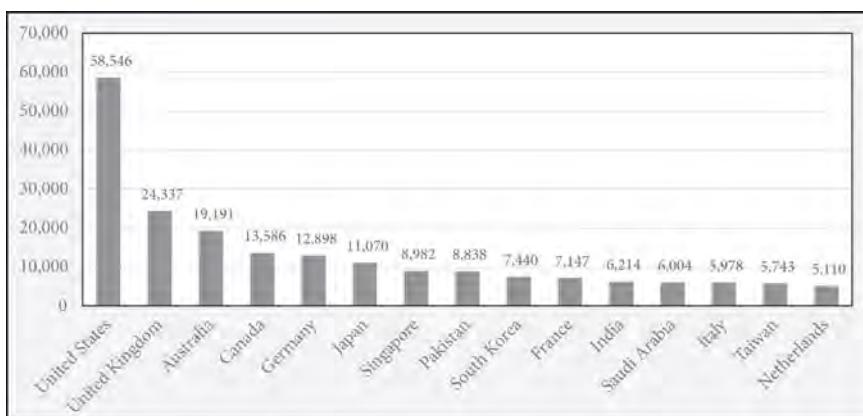


Figure 7.3 Number of papers in Scopus jointly authored by researchers from China and the nations, nation-to-nation partnerships of more than 5,000 papers: 2022.

Source: Author, using data from NSB (2024).

countries strongly supported continued open cooperation (*The Economist*, 2024b). But the US Senate saw China as a ‘whole of society threat’ (Zha, 2024, p. 1544). Technology and the associated science were seen in the United States as a primary matter of geopolitical contest (Inkster, 2020).

‘Scientific discovery, which is fundamentally borderless, is being politically bordered’ (Lee and Li, 2021, p. 2). In the late 2010s, the United States’ turn to decoupling was supported by successive research reports and polemics from state agencies and think-tanks. Similar material appeared elsewhere in the Anglosphere and Western Europe. This literature framed China engagement in antagonistic terms. At first the main direct allegation was that Chinese researchers and students were ‘stealing’ American intellectual property. Here the line between borderless flows of knowledge and hostile nation-to-nation espionage seemed to blur. Later, decoupling polemics stigmatized individuals and institutions in China seen as linked to the ‘Chinese Communist Party’ or ‘Peoples Liberation Army’. In effect, this meant all Chinese universities, researchers and scholarship holders; all higher education in China was nested in government, meaning the party-state, and China like all nations had a state-controlled military. The decoupling rhetoric positioned all university persons from China as potential spies. Given the volume of higher educational traffic between China and the United States – as well as the research cooperation, Chinese nationals were the largest group of international students (369,548 in 2018–19), including graduate students (133, 396) (IIE, 2025) – the pejorative framing was bound to have a seismic effect in the global higher education space.

The China Initiative investigated 150 academics in the United States, almost 90 per cent of Chinese heritage (*The Economist*, 2025). Further investigations were conducted by the FBI (Lee and Li, 2021, p. 2). The focus was on persons suspected of undeclared affiliations in China, and/or undeclared sources of funding from China. None were found guilty of spying or stealing intellectual property, though some were convicted of lesser offences such as grant fraud. However, the investigations had a ‘chilling effect’ on research collaboration. Further investigations were conducted by the National Institute of Health, again focused on undeclared links to China and again finding little of note. Nevertheless: 103 of the 246 scientists lost their jobs (Zha, 2024, pp. 1544–5). A survey by Lee and Li (2021) of 1,949 scientists in leading US universities highlighted the scientific importance of China/US collaborations but found that following the China Initiative, 23 per cent of the Chinese heritage scientists surveyed and 10 per cent of the non-Chinese heritage scientists had ‘decided not to work with collaborators in China on future projects’ (p. 10). The China

Initiative was cancelled by the Biden government in 2022 because it had led to a 'harmful perception' of racial profiling. However, investigations continued, and in September 2024, the Republican-controlled US House of Representatives revived it as the 'CCP Initiative'.

Visas for Chinese students entering the United States dropped from over 280,000 in 2015 to less than 90,000 in 2023 (*The Economist*, 2023a). Sharma (2024a) reports instances of border harassment of Chinese nationals holding valid visas to enter the United States, including forced return to China. After the China Initiative began, most US university presidents stopped visits to that country. By 2023, US universities had closed more than 100 language-teaching Confucius Institutes (Altbach and de Wit, 2023). The US State Department categorized China as a 'category three' country, meaning 'don't go if you don't have to go' (Sharma, 2024b), and between 2015 and 2023 the number of US students in China fell from 15,000 to 350. There were 1,219 scheduled direct plane flights between China and the United States in February 2019; there were 269 such flights in February 2024 (*The Economist*, 2024a). All contact was faltering.

It was disturbing how easy it was to shut down fruitful international cooperation. In January 2025 a highly productive large-scale two-decade partnership between two world-leading engineering universities, Michigan and Shanghai Jiao Tong, was closed by the US institution after a bout of name-calling in a Republican-dominated Congress Committee. This followed the 2024 decisions of the University of California, Berkeley to terminate a ten-year-old research hub with Tsinghua University and Georgia Institute of Technology's withdrawal from a ten-year joint research institute with Tianjin University (Stone, 2025).

In December 2024 the two countries renewed the 1979 US-China Agreement on Cooperation in Science and Technology to share data in domains such as climate change and epidemiology, but on a more limited basis to exclude 'critical and emerging technologies' (US government, 2024). From 2012 to 2022, the proportion of US collaborative papers that were with China fell from 47 to 32 per cent (*The Economist*, 2024a). From 2020 to 2022 the number of joint papers fell from 62,904 to 58,546 (NSB, 2024). The decoupling was taking effect.

The US government placed sustained political pressure on its Western allies to subject all scientific relations in China to national security policy. Typically, this led to blanket risk-management regimes whereby all Chinese researchers in any field, even education or the humanities, were seen as potentially untrustworthy. This discouraged collaborative projects and reduced university autonomy and academic freedom in the West. The potentials of two kinds of global space making, networked bottom-up science and university-to-university

partnerships and agreements, were each diminished. In Australia, collaborative agreements between Australian and Chinese universities were subjected to formal approval from the government Department of Foreign Affairs. This was later rescinded, but by 2022 the top eight Australian universities were conducting one-third as many projects with China as in 2019 (Ross, 2023). In some countries, China Scholarship Council students were banned (Altbach and de Wit, 2023). Many countries followed the US pattern of closing Confucius Institutes. For its part, China remained open for cooperation but became 'more inward looking' (*The Economist*, 2024a), tightening the regulation of outward academic travel (Sharma, 2024b).

Spatial strategies of closure build agency by means other than engagement, fostering capacity behind protective walls, while partitioning space to block other agents from shared systems or each other. The US/China decoupling was designed to slow the geopolitical shift in the balance of power and if possible contain China's rise. Some in the United States assumed that Chinese creativity was sourced in American creativity and decoupling would cut it off. This expectation doomed to fail. In establishing its scientific capacity, China's approach had not been one of borrowing and imitation but building endogenous creativity (Marginson, 2018b). Yet the collateral damage from the misguided spatial strategy was enormous.

'The process of aligning science with national strategic goals threatens to impede global scientific excellence and the capacity to mitigate global challenges' (Chih et al., 2023). The decoupling was inconsistent with the open intellectual exchange integral to higher education (Zha, 2024, p. 1546). China/US decoupling and the national securitization of Western research remade the global science space, transferring much of it from primarily open grassroots collaboration to a regulated space shared by nation-states and universities. In outline this brought Western science closer in form to Chinese science, but the Chinese side now placed more trust in the autonomous global links sustained by its scientists.

Conclusions

Since 2015, the Western strategy of building and exploiting a world-inclusive globalization has transformed into a more historically familiar pattern of imperial and national geopolitics that suborns open global relations. Except in outliers like Russia, few in government as yet argue against the principle of a single joined-up global knowledge network and cross-border cooperation between

universities. Nevertheless, the ground is shifting: soft power goals are receding and open doors are no longer the norm. Hard power and securitization are more important. Governments are freeing themselves to more forcefully impose a single national-scale identity in universities and science. Higher education is expected to fall into line. Its global projects and its protestations at blockages to cross-border communications, people mobility and research exchange are brushed aside. Universities and scientists still work the global space (and it still has state sector champions, especially outside the West) but are increasingly challenged by technocratic nationalism, zero-sum thinking and securitization.

There are limits to the extent that scientific knowledge can be bottled up, but in state circles, particularly in the United States and Europe, normative support for open science has declined. China is on another policy path and continues to expand its scientific relations where it can, including with non-Western countries. The continuing US strategy of decoupling has triggered longer-term potentials for the evolution of two partly separated global systems of science and technology with restricted movement between them. In turn, this may encourage the evolution of at least one science bloc as a more inclusive system that admits non-English work, including endogenous knowledge (see Chapters 9 and 11).

Relations of power in global higher education continue to be shaped by all five of the historical layers discussed in this chapter. In the non-Western world, the powerful global momentum away from coloniality continues, building national agency amid multipolarity. Non-Western countries generally hold to the 1945 principles of sovereign internationalism, systemic diversity, national self-determination and non-interference, while the United States holds to its own rules-based order and its Western allies follow. The neocolonial era in higher education kickstarted in 1990 continues in many respects in the Anglo-American-led university hierarchy and the commercial market in international education. Yet the growing multipolarity in university capacity and science is likely to further destabilize that inherited order.

In some Euro-American circles, global multipolarity has led to partial or complete disillusionment with global engagement. This is not shared in higher education, which could become decoupled from some other public actors. The widespread anti-globalization and bounded nationalism is especially evident in the nativist opposition to migration that has spilled over into disruption of global student flows. Western nativism can be partly explained by Western anxieties about the rise of the non-white non-West, inverting half a millennium of colonial and neocolonial relations. Yet there is also a worldwide tendency,

reaching well beyond the West, to national self-sufficiency in political economy and autarky in politics. This again can be understood as an outcome of the faltering of the post-1990 American-led global convergence. No new kind of global convergence has yet developed to replace it.

* * * * *

‘The crisis consists precisely in the fact that the old is dying and the new cannot be born; in this interregnum a great variety of morbid symptoms appear’ (Gramsci, 1971, pp. 275–6). The erosion of post-1990 convergence and the surge of bounded nationalism seem to postpone potentials for global common good, as evident in the deterioration of multilateral negotiations on the climate-nature emergency. At the same time, the neocolonial element in post-1990 higher education is still partly intact, as evident in attitudes to the global public good in the UK (Chapter 8), continued exclusions of the non-West from influence in the shaping of global science (Chapter 9), and Western approaches to cross-border education (Chapter 10).

There is evident tension between the fact of multipolar trajectories in higher education, and what is possible, what is permitted, where those trajectories meet. Meanwhile there is no global protocol and no global agency to protect mobile persons in higher education, maintain unfettered research cooperation, and uphold academic freedom in the face of interventionist states. This highlights the question of the global common good in higher education and the need for new structural global relations in the sector (Chapter 11).

Sovereign Nationalism in Higher Education in England

No one can escape dealing with, if not the East/West division, then the North/South one, the have/have-not one, the imperialist/anti-imperialist one, the white/coloured one. We cannot get around them all by pretending they do not exist; on the contrary, contemporary Orientalism teaches us a great deal about the intellectual dishonesty of dissembling on that score, the result of which is to intensify the divisions and make them both vicious and permanent.

~ Edward Said, *Orientalism*, Vintage Books, New York, 1979, p. 327

Chapter 7 analysed the global space in higher education and science and relations of power within it. It highlighted the transition from a hegemonic Euro-American world led by systems and institutions in the Anglosphere to more distributed strength in political economy and higher education and the rise of non-Western systems. Yet that transition is incomplete and it is resisted in the West. Higher education is still largely structured by a Western (and especially Anglo-American) hegemony in models of the university, norms in education and research and codified global knowledge almost exclusively in English. Above all, the global higher education space is colonized by sovereign nationalism: by the arrangement of the world, including higher education systems, in zero-sum fashion, with universities annexed to parochial projects of global competition. Normative nationalism is often (though not always) linked to methodological nationalism, the blinkered perspective that cannot see the global or pan-national regional scales at all except as functions of the nation-state.

Lili Yang contributed to an earlier version of this chapter through shared conduct of interviews and data analysis, and critical review of the manuscript. Tom Brotherhood contributed to the same version through shared conduct of interviews, and critical review of the manuscript.

So where in all that is the global public good or global common good in higher education? To what extent are the benefits of global relations in higher education and knowledge combined and mutual, collective across large regions or worldwide in basis? Or are those benefits largely secured by particular institutions or national systems, as in the imperial tradition? This chapter reports on empirical research into understandings of the global public good in one highly internationalized system, England in the UK, a country which until seventy-five years ago was a formidable imperial power. This chapter is the twin to Chapter 3. Whereas Chapter 3 investigated the public good role of higher education in the national scale in England, the focus here is on the public good role in the global scale – albeit, as will become apparent, with the global scale being largely viewed through a national lens.

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Introduction: Global public good

The chapter investigates the global engagement of universities in England in the UK, as seen by practitioners of that engagement. The research data consist of thirty-seven semi-structured interviews in three English universities and with policy professionals, including current and former policy makers/regulators, leaders of national higher education organizations, and academic experts on the sector. The research focused on the cross-border engagements of institutions within England: offshore campuses and online enrolments were not directly investigated. Interviewees were questioned on their understandings of the nature of that cross-border engagement, and relations between global activity and local/national activities. One issue was the extent to which the global activities of institutions were seen as of value not just to higher education in England, but to other parts of the world, constituting shared *global public good*. The overarching research question was:

What does higher education in England contribute to global public good, according to practitioners?

Interpretive framework

Chapters 2 and 3 identified four distinct meanings of 'public' in the Anglosphere: (1) '*the* public good' as a normative condition of universal welfare, well-being

or beneficence; (2) 'public goods' as half of a dual with private goods, as used in marginalist economics (Samuelson, 1954); (3) 'public' meaning state sector or government, in a dual with the private realm; and (4) public as an inclusive communicative population, as in 'public opinion', or 'the public sphere'. In this chapter interviewees mostly understood global public good via meaning (1). There was no global state to facilitate meanings (2) and (3). Some referred to global civil society or global business, which took the idea of 'public' closer to meaning (4).

However, the interpretations of the interviewees do not limit the framework of interpretation used in the chapter. As outlined in Chapter 3, 'public good' outcomes of higher education are understood as outcomes *other than pecuniary benefits* for individuals (e.g. better salaries and employment opportunities) and institutions (e.g. university revenues and prestige). Public good outcomes in higher education consist of (a) non-pecuniary benefits for individuals like knowledge, enhanced agency and lifelong learning; and (b) higher education's many collective social, economic, political and cultural contributions, including to 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 chapter is about public good outcomes in the global scale of higher education and research.

The data presented here primarily concern type (b) global public goods, mutually beneficial collective outcomes. There are brief references to type (a) outcomes, the non-pecuniary enlargement of mobile persons (Brooks and Waters, 2011; Marginson, 2014a).

Collective outcomes of higher education across more than one country, and in the world as a whole, can also be understood as 'global common good'. Arguably common good is a more explanatory concept than public good (see Chapter 6), but in this research in England that concept could not be explored because interviewees were not familiar with it. Theorized meanings of global public good and global common good are discussed further in Chapter 11.

This chapter proceeds as follows. After the introduction, the next section provides background on higher and international education in England (see also Chapter 3). Then the empirical research is explained, including the customized interview sample. This is succeeded by the findings, discussion and conclusions. There is access to a data file with fuller interview findings in Marginson et al. (2025).

International higher education in England

As was discussed in Chapter 3 the UK is a conglomerate nation with four different higher education systems, though more than four-fifths of all students are in England. All but one of the interviewees reported in this chapter were in England, and the discussion was entirely focused on the highly marketized English system. The term 'Britain' refers to the England-dominated four nations in the UK.

UK and English higher education have extensive and intensive cross-border connections through student mobility, university partnerships, research networks and high citation science. In 2022 the UK was third in the quantity of high citation science after China and the United States, while 66.6 per cent of all science papers with UK authors had international co-authors, compared to the world average of 22.6 per cent (NSB, 2024). More than four-fifths of those papers had at least one university author. In 2022 UK higher education institutions enrolled the second largest number of cross-border students, after the United States, using the UNESCO (2024) measure: students entering another country for educational purposes for one year or more.

The global role of British higher education rests on accumulated academic resources, organizational capabilities, and university prestige, mutually reproductive factors that are in part 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 and contributions to science and scholarship 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 their centrality, how much English universities further the welfare of other countries, and the world, and on whose terms, are matters of broad interest. Do the English universities really meet common global challenges, solve shared global problems, and 'make the world a better place' as many state in their marketing? What do English universities understand as shared problems and making the world a better place? How do they fulfil such ambitions? Do they work for the world as a whole only to the extent that their own needs are met, or do they make the global good primary? Further, how do they read their role within the changing global landscape? When the interviews reported here were conducted, the global space was changing rapidly (Chapters 7 and 9).

The rise of China, South Korea, Singapore, India, Indonesia, Brazil and other non-Western systems indicated multi-polar global relations. How much were interviewees aware that the historic hegemony of the UK was on a downward trajectory? Would they see the global public good as furthered by a continuing Anglo-American-dominated order in higher education and research, or would they prefer countries learning from each other in a diverse setting?

The historic authority of 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 and Edwards, 2022), had made the British universities powerful attractors of fee-paying international students. For at least some of those students, cross-border higher education led to individualized pecuniary benefits sufficient to sustain the private investment. However, the extent to which commercial international education generated collective global public goods was less clear. How would the interviewees in England see this? This question took on greater importance because of the English universities' growing financial dependence on international student fees, and the scale of that dependence, which are now briefly examined.

Commercial international education

In 1979 the newly elected Thatcher Conservative government introduced full cost fees for international students, installing a new profit-making incentive. 'If there was one decision which may be said to have contributed to the marketization of British higher education, it was this' (Shattock, 2012, p. 160). Universities began to use international students to fill gaps in public funding. For long the impact was modest but by 2012–13, when full marketization was introduced for domestic students, non-EU international student fees constituted 12.4 per cent of institutional income in England (Figure 8.1). Ten years later in 2022–23 this proportion was 21.1 per cent, constituting £9.3 billion. The 553,590 non-EU internationals constituted 22.8 per cent of enrolled students in England (HESA, 2024). When EU students were added, many of whom now paid full international fees following completion of the Brexit process, the total international proportion was 26.0 per cent. Full fee international students paid £9,000–38,000 a year depending on institution, programme and year level, averaging £22,000 for first degrees (British Council, 2024). These fees subsidized domestic education, buildings and facilities; and remarkably, UK research.

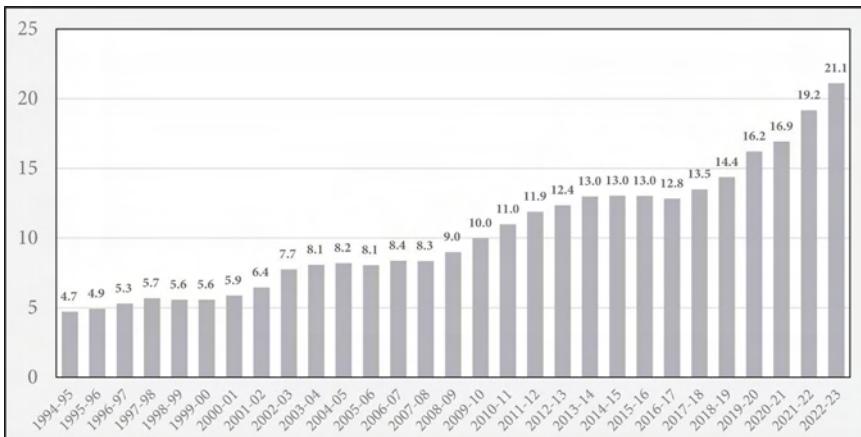


Figure 8.1 Proportion (%) of income of higher education institutions in England derived from non-EU international student fees: 1994-95 to 2022-23.

Source: Author, based on data from HESA (2024).

Research was widely agreed by economists regardless of their policy persuasions to be a public good in economic terms. Yet it had become part funded by global commerce, taking marketization further than suggested by Samuelson's (1954) framework, discussed in Chapter 2.

Financial dependence on international students increased after 2012 as the post-inflation value of the standard maximum domestic student tuition fee declined, losing three tenths of its value in real terms, with a 22 per cent drop between 2017 and 2024 alone (Chapter 3). Decline in the domestic unit of resource combined with the capacity to increase international student numbers – albeit subject to UK Home Office approval of additional student visas – led to the sharp rise in the international proportion of both student numbers and total income (Figure 8.2). In 2016-17, non-EU international student income was 0.39 of income from domestic student fees, but by 2022-23 that ratio had reached 0.74. Yet the ratio in terms of student numbers in 2022-23 was a lesser 0.31 (HESA, 2024).

In sum, English higher education was increasingly financed by the hyper-exploitation of international students, mostly from countries with lower per capita incomes than the UK, who were paying tuition charges well in excess of the average cost of student places.

International education in England was associated with multiple goals and diverse discourses, including the educational benefits of cross-cultural learning, global citizenship and shared global challenges, national soft power,

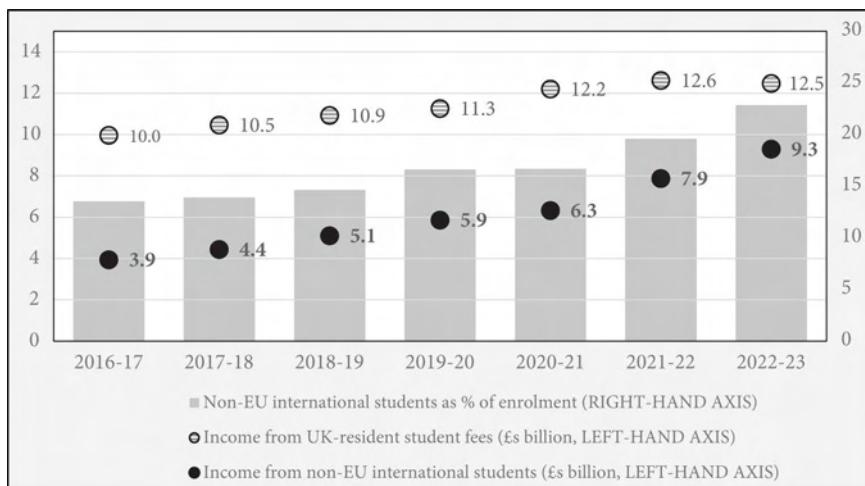


Figure 8.2 Income from non-EU international students compared to UK-resident student fees (£s billion, LEFT-HAND AXIS), and proportion of enrolled students that were non-EU international, higher education [%], RIGHT-HAND AXIS], England: 2016–17 to 2022–23.

Source: Author, based on data from HESA (2024).

and international graduates as potential high-skilled migrants. The intrinsically cooperative nature of cross-border higher education, and widespread commitments to higher education as a public good (see Chapter 3), sat uneasily with neoliberal political economy and the drive to maximize revenues. This raises questions about which goals, practices and ways of seeing cross-border relations had the most weight.

The empirical research

This chapter draws on four groups of interviews conducted in England between 2017 and 2021. Interviews U-1 to U-13, focused on UK higher education and public good, were 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, were face to face in 2019 in Midlands regional university 3. All three universities had extensive global links. The Covid-19 pandemic slowed data collection. Policy professionals P-1 to P-11, including policy makers and regulators currently or previously in government,

leaders of national higher education organizations and professors expert in higher education policy, were interviewed online in 2021. Interviews P-1 to P-11, like U-1 to U-13, were focused on UK higher education and public good (both sets of interviews were also discussed in Chapter 3). The Appendix to this book after Chapter 11 lists the thirty-seven interviewees.

The interviewees were people who themselves constructed relational global space and engaged in cross-border activities, some as senior leaders. The main relevant change in the policy setting over the 2017 to 2021 period was that in 2018 the UK government liberalized international graduate post-study work visas, opening the way for student numbers to grow rapidly. In addition, in 2019 interviewees were especially conscious of the effects of Brexit in weakening ties within Europe, though by 2021 the loss of EU ties had been normalized and was scarcely discussed.

This chapter covers only those parts of the interviews related to global public good. Interviewees U-1 to U-13 and P-1 to P-11 were asked to conceptualize and discuss higher education and public good. This included the following question:

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

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

- What are the main global public good 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 for U-14 to U-26 focused on cross-border equity, a shared global good:

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

The findings reported here also take in other parts of the interviews where terms like 'global' 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.

Findings from the interviews

Constructing relations in global space

Interviewees conceived the global space in terms of both cooperation and mutual interest, and competition and self-interest. When the global public good was explicitly discussed, it pushed the discussion more towards cooperation. More than a third of interviewees discussed worldwide higher education in terms of the type (4) meaning of 'public', 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 joined to discussion of global engagement, connectedness and commonality. It was noticeable that some who invoked the shared global community imaginary in vague idealistic terms then moved to hard-headed realism when international revenues were being discussed.

Global public good. Many university interviewees, accustomed to talking up global engagement, readily slipped into a normative internationalism in which all cross-border activity was inherently virtuous in abstract-universal terms: type (1) 'public good'. This legitimated the pursuit of all global agendas, including university business activity, as with the Jane Knight definition of 'internationalization' (see Chapter 10). The global space was seen as both a shared public good and a medium in which universities pursued comparative advantage, and international students investing in British education pursued career advantages (e.g. U-15; U-17; U-20, U-22). Not all agreed. Two interviewees noted the global space was not 'public' in the sense of non-market or cooperative, because it was normed by inter-national competition (P-2) and university rankings (P-8). Nevertheless, an ambiguous all-things-to-all-people approach to mobility largely prevailed, for example in the recurring win-win talk about inward mobility at university 3 (e.g. U-17, U-18, U-20, U-22, U-24, 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), as noted also by all three international students in the study (U-21, U-23, U-26). There were occasional qualms about brain drain from the global South and the ethics of commercial education (discussed below), though overall, global public goods received limited attention.

Nevertheless, though all saw the 'global' as an important dimension of activity there were limited reflections on the term 'global public good'. When it arose in questions many interviewees asked for elaboration. Almost half (16/37) explained 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). There was often an easy confidence that universities were 'making the world a better place'.

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

Research, especially, lent itself to assertions of global public good (U-7, U-22, P-5, P-10) though this was discussed less than expected. 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).

Relations between 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). Brexit had suggested local resentment about global missions that had to be addressed (U-15, U-20). Other interviewees were strong normative internationalists who said that 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). Fourteen university interviewees (U-5, U-6, U-10, U-13 to 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 some evidence of global/national dissonance. Eight criticized 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 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 organization

In a system framed as a national market, weaker institutions claimed nominally equivalent status to maximize their starting position and opportunities. In all three universities people placed no limits on their own institution's global mission, though some at the London university 1 thought that other universities might pursue more local less global missions.

Global singularity or diversity?

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

In contrast with 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 thirty-seven interviewees saw relations in the global space as multiple in character with more than one possible take on the global public good. For U-2 it was '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. At university 3, U-18 criticized 'the default way of thinking in the UK' that saw the country as 'the majority', meaning the global norm, with non-British nations exhibiting 'identities and cultures and behaviours that deviate from the norm ... 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 had 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 higher education space as a projection of the national space and viewed that global space from a UK-centric position. While British patriotism was rarely referenced directly it had a taken-for-granted quality. Only five in the sample of thirty-seven, including the three international students at university 3, questioned assumptions about the global superiority of British education and research. Many interviewees made that claim explicit. Methodological nationalism and normative nationalism reinforced each other.

National public good as global public good. Global public goods were often presented as beneficial outcomes for other countries created by British universities when they moved beyond the border (e.g. U-9), rather than created interactively between agents in a shared space. In research, higher education as 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, see also U-25).

In this imaginary, British universities were a font of knowledge for the world, a donor with a superior culture and education for 'developing countries'. Positioning themselves at the centre, interviewees saw their universities as drawing the world's attention while making that same world a better place

in fee-based international education, advice and consultancy, research collaboration and trickle-down effects from published science. The UK made global public good by being itself, a hubristic claim 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. 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 one university leader wryly put it (U-14). It was striking how some interviewees moved spatially in a fluent fashion between the perspective of looking outwards from an English centre, and the perspective of seeing the world as a whole, from above, freeing them to operate anywhere on earth.

Britain's global role was talked about in the same normative manner as the win-win discourse about internationalization. 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 renovated societies and polities elsewhere. Working with these assumptions, the unabashed pursuit of English self-interest, such as the maximum recruitment of international students at the highest possible price, could be rationalized as contributions to the universal global good.

The discourse about the outward gifting of public good via education and research blended into formal foreign aid (e.g. U-14). For U-16, the contribution of the university to global public good could be measured in terms of transactional self-interest by the volume of foreign aid funding obtained. Some interviewees joined the gifting of global public good to national soft power via higher education and research (U-15, P-2) though U-17 cautioned that not every mobile student was won over by soft power. One international doctoral student stated that some university programmes were insular, needing more 'international components' (U-23). However, among the ten faculty and

administrators at university 3, most of whom would have described themselves as 'internationalist', only one expressed similar thoughts.

Self-satisfaction and UK-centrism were shared by some of the interviewees who acknowledged global multiplicity and were not methodologically nationalist. They saw British universities as embodying a superior culture within the global space in terms of critical thinking or democracy (e.g. U-25), or frankly gave priority to national interests (e.g. P-7) even while accepting that there was global good that was separate from national good.

Taken for granted excellence. Assumptions that British universities were global leaders who defined the excellence of global public goods had a pragmatic grounding in British research power, reputational rankings and cross-border student flows. The UK-centrism of most of the interviewees lay not in their recognition of these realities but in a lack of reflexivity about the conditions that sustained Britain's global role. Most took this 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 power of UK and US universities in the systems whereby global knowledge was defined (see Chapters 9 and 11), which underpinned their global status and their pull in international student flows. There was no awareness that the epistemic and linguistic primacy could be different or could be challenged. There was surprisingly little attention to rising China, East Asia and India. 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

Yet there was no reflection on coloniality in this or any other interview. A non-British interviewee might see Britain's position as a former colonizer and present neo-colonizer as central to a discussion in England of higher education and global public good. It was a striking silence. Interviewees either had not broken from imperialism or found the topic too controversial. There

was more humility about Brexit. Interviewees worried about the disruption of student mobility and EU citizen staff (U-3, U-15, U-18) and lost European research funding (e.g. U-14). 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). For an EU student at university 3, Brexit 'says that they don't want us' (U-26).

Commercialization and global inequity

All interviewees identified global inequities in higher education and research. For many this implied a responsibility for institutions in the UK as a 'richer and more fortunate country' (P-5), as part of their contribution 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 rarely discussed.

Whether England's universities themselves fostered global inequity was a more difficult topic. If their global role was based on a claimed superiority it was scarcely egalitarian. For P-7 'internationalization 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 there was a net transfer of talent into British universities and society, as many international students had 'no intention of going back home' (U-25). Some interviewees presented the maximization of inward talent flows as an explicit goal of national and university strategy (e.g. U-14, U-16, U-22). Two interviewees rationalized 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. These questions were troubling because the university had policy commitments to widening access and participation of domestic students in England. Equitable access was readily seen as a national public good but not as a global public good, which would have conflicted with maximizing revenue from international students. By subsidizing research and domestic education international education generated national public benefits but not global public good. 'If it is just national public good then ... [globally]

it's a market area' (U-9). Interviewees struggled with the question about equity in the global scale.

That is very hard to answer, really.

U-22, university 3, senior manager-leader

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

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 '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 so readily. 'We have to take that potential criticism and ... play that back to ourselves internally'. U-20 advocated a large scholarship programme. U-19 and U-25 also advocated scholarships. But how could this work within the logic of the commercial international education programme? No one really thought it would happen.

Commercialism excludes other goals. Given the multiple missions of higher education, it was striking the extent to which recruitment of fee-paying non-EU international students subordinated other global agendas: 'There's lip service to "internationalization", but what the university management means by it is how can we get the highest fee-paying students in' (U-11, 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 from diverse classrooms, a professor at university 3 instead went straight to the corporate good: 'There is the revenue benefits of course. These students pay incredibly high fees' (U-25). Later in the same interview the interviewee stated: 'It's primarily financial in most cases but ... they should be

prioritising building a relationship with these students'. The apparent humanism was not as it seemed. 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:

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

As one faculty member at university 3 pointed out, the problem was not the greed of the university or its leaders, it was the system settings in England. Universities were 'being compelled to adopt an aggressively competitive attitude or stance within a marketised system ... Marketisation means that we no longer really belong to the public' (U-18).

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? Do its cross-border activities make the world a better place or just improve national and institutional prospects? The picture differs between research and international education. Arguably much global research constitutes global public good. Research entails norms of open knowledge creation and many projects are collaborations focused on common problems. As noted, two thirds of papers with UK authors have cross-border partners. There are also limits to British research as global public good. While epistemic collaboration can be conducted in 'flat' disciplinary networks that assume equality of respect (Marginson, 2022e), it is mediated by an unequal global status competition of

researchers and universities, and the continuing Euro-American hegemony in knowledge and language (see Chapters 9 and 11). The global research network is open but its norms and protocols are monopolized by a small number of agents.

Cross-border student mobility in England is another matter. After Brexit in 2016 the EU's Erasmus+ mobility scheme was phased out; and after 2020-21 new EU degree students no longer paid tuition at English resident rates. From thereon all inward international student movement was commercial in form, with a trickle of scholarships overwhelmed by the flood of fee-based places. While the market for domestic students installed in England in 2012 had problematized the role of higher education in national public good, the wholly commercial form of international education after 2019 problematized its role in global public good. The interviews make it clear that the drive to maximize revenues had dominated institutional behaviours in the global space while reducing the scope for global public goods. International student fees at an average £22,000 are wholly incompatible with equitable access, let alone global justice and decolonization. Fully commercial education also demands a singularity of approach that empties out recognition of multiple university missions, including the optimization of cross-cultural learning pursued by U-17 and U-18.

It was difficult for most interviewees to be reflexive about the mission tensions. It was easier to embrace the vacuous premise that any and every cross-border action by British universities created public good (or at least some kind of good) in 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 internationalization in which the routine university practices of the Anglosphere were the global script. It is fortunate that self-serving practices in British international education do not close off all positive potentials in global action. International education nurtures nascent potentials for public good in the form of diverse university communities, enabling student learning and self-formation that otherwise would not occur. Yet in the interviews such non-transactional outcomes were largely opaque, suggesting that when international students gained them it happened more from the fact of shared space or through their own efforts than through institutional or pedagogical design.

In these interviews global public good was largely defined and embraced to the extent it coincided with national and institutional interest. Some simply equated the global public good with actions to secure national and university status and revenues, as if self-interest alone generated worldwide benefits. Even in research the discussion was more about the good things that Britain did than the better world it was helping to make. Colonialism was ignored but Brexit's

negative effects on cross-border relations were noted, as inward flows of funding and talent were at stake. 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 commercial positioning of hegemonic institutions devoted to learning and knowledge had fostered a discursive landscape that was loose, contradictory, self-serving and 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 global equity.

The Imperial spatial inheritance

Scope for shared global public good is maximized when the global space is constructed on the basis of common values, such as learning and knowledge as ends in themselves, and 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. Sovereign nationalism, in which the national interest is separated from the collective interest, limits the potential for global public good. At worst, relations between national interest and global good are zero-sum not positive-sum.

English higher education has a limited scope to create global public good because of *material incentives* that elevate marketing above other goals and marketing talk above authentic discourse, and because of the *global imaginings* and choices of agents. The two factors are combined. UK-centrism and claims to global superiority underpin the commercial positioning of the nation and its institutions. Citing one or another of the parallel global rankings produced by two London-based business services companies (whichever one maximizes the institution's position), English universities present as educationally superior to all others including universities in the countries from which 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 statements about absolute quality, as what they also offer is global aristocratic prestige.

Because of this global positioning it is impossible to 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 one-to-one gifts of public goods across the border carry the sting that the agency and status of recipients is diminished by the gift. The cultural form of those donated goods excludes the culture of the receiver: the status hierarchy is continually

hammered home. In these interviews most university leaders, administrators and faculty were indifferent to the hubris and to the cultural and educational costs of excluding models and languages from outside the Anglosphere. Consistent with this, there was little sense of global mutuality in the interviews. Other countries were scarcely mentioned and there were no ideas of combined global vision. Among those who regretted Brexit none referenced the EU as an exponent of collective outlook. Most saw just one global good, their own. Only three interviewees could see Britain from outside. Global ecology, the most material exemplar of the world as a common home, was rarely referenced.

There was nothing inevitable about this. 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. Yet most of these interviewees, relatively sophisticated in global matters, not only presented themselves as absolutely superior within the world, they seemed to believe their own marketing. This position was so common across the group as to be culturally rather than individually nested. This requires explanation. What is it that so firmly holds the nation-centric, nation-bounded, hierarchical global imaginary in place?

This takes interpretation beyond what was said in the semi-structured interviews to what was unsaid. After 1945 in Germany there was a cultural break, a collective process of 'we were wrong'. No such moment followed the disintegration of the British Empire in the 1940s and 1950s. How far has English higher education moved from the imperial mindset, with its unquestionable self-belief, its one-way flows of cultural adaptation, its large-scale material exploitation, and its premise that distinctive other societies must be quaint or obsolete? Judging by most of these interviews the answer is 'not far'. The geopolitical reality of international higher education and research is that net inward transfers of capital and talent on the UK's scale, and claims of cultural hegemony, prolong neocolonial relations. This was not problematized by any of the thirty-seven interviewees. That might be the most important finding in this research on English higher education and public good.

Interviewees drew on the imperial spatial inheritance. This has at least three components. First, agentic confidence to move anywhere and intervene anywhere at will, physically, virtually or in the imagination. Massey (2005) associates the neo-imperial outlook especially with London, 'its gaze sweeps the planet' (p. 155). Global space is seen as a single flat surface which 'the coloniser, as the only active agent, crosses to find the to-be-colonised simply "there"' (p. 63). Second,

while the world is seen as a free field of action, the agent is nation-centred and has no obligations to reciprocity, or the good of the world as a whole as a single subject (Zhao, 2021). The world is understood not as a home shared with others, it is a domain of opportunity, a zone from which self-value is extracted (e.g. revenues, soft power). Third, there is an exchange between methodological nationalism and normative nationalism. The methodological blinkers block the possibility of a deep engagement with other cultures, or the world as a whole, which would disturb the entrenched national-imperial project. 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. Imperial methodological nationalism disqualifies English universities from effective participation in global common good. However, global higher education is a relational space with many other countries and institutions in play. The world is multipolar in capacity in both education and research, and becoming more so. Hierarchies that elevate the agency of some by diminishing others are not inevitable. Fortunately, some interviewees saw more than one cultural perspective on the global, or were troubled by the contradictions in the business model. A few questioned British hubris. These reflections suggest global commonality can be built in England. Yet none stepped right away from the bordered nation to a transpositional view (Sen, 2002), in which the whole world is the subject, and all agents are equally respected.

* * * * *

This chapter shows that cross-border engagement alone is insufficient to create global public good in higher education. Cross-border relations grounded in mutual respect and shared interest are the key. Though inequalities of power are inevitable, closed reproductive hierarchies are not. Chapters 9 and 10 will expand on this tension between the hegemonic neocolonial project in global higher education, and the more open possibilities of the increasingly multipolar setting, first in research and science and then in cross-border education.

Configurations of Power in Global Science

... the social space thus produced also serves as a tool of thought and action ... in addition to being a means of production it is also a means of control, and hence of domination, of power; yet ... as such, it escapes in part from those who would make use of it.

~ Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, transl.
Donald Nicholson-Smith, 1991, Blackwell, p. 26

Collaborative research science, mostly conducted in universities, constitutes a spectacular and transformative form of the globalization of higher education. The emergence, growth and spread of the one-world science system that were made possible by the joining up of the internet combine the bottom-up epistemic interactions of researchers with institution-building by universities and research institutes, and the actions of governments, national agencies and corporations. Until the last decade governments around the world supported the evolution of autonomous global science, though for many science was and is less a medium of creative cooperation and competition in discovery than a tool of national interest and competition in global power.

Global science nicely illustrates the dynamics of global space making and geopolitics introduced in Chapter 7. Spatially there is always potential tension (and synergy) between scientific relations and activities in the global scale, and in the national scale. Politically there is tension between on one hand institutionalized Western hegemony in science, publishing and bibliometrics, and on the other hand the ever-increasing diversification of scientific capacity in a multipolar era and the vast infrastructure of worldwide knowledge, mostly in languages other than English and excluded from the global system. In its analysis of global, national and institutional relations of power in science the chapter uses concepts and methods from political economy and human geography,

summary secondary data on scientific output, and research studies of science mostly drawn from the sub-discipline of scientometrics.

* * * * *

Introduction: Global science

In many disciplines global science is the epistemically dominant work. Science and higher education are closely joined (Powell et al., 2017; Baker and Powell, 2024). More than four fifths of published science papers have at least one university author. Only a minority of higher education institutions conduct research but those that do are important in science, while research is the marker of status in universities worldwide.

‘Global science’ as manifest, visible, can be understood in proxy terms as published knowledge in the two main bibliometric collections, Web of Science (WoS, 2024) owned by Clarivate Analytics, and Scopus (Elsevier, 2024) owned by Elsevier, the largest academic publishing company. In addition to natural science-based fields the bibliometric collections include some work in social sciences and a small part of scholarship in the humanities.

Global science in this sense consists almost entirely of work published in the English language. Hence though global science is the only knowledge that is part of a single accessible system, it is not the same as human knowledge as a whole even in natural sciences. This is the most fundamental fact about relations of power in science. The list of exclusions from global science in the bibliometric collections is a long one. It includes academic work in languages other than English and all Indigenous knowledge. The limits of the bibliometric collections as repositories of knowledge are returned to below.

The chapter begins with the dynamics of the growth of the global system, and relations between global science, and national government and science. Then it explores global diversification and multipolarity in science and the foil for this global multiplicity, the hegemonic relations of power in science – the continuing dominance of the West (and especially Anglo-America) in many scientific matters, and what is excluded from the charmed circle. The conclusion follows. The main secondary data sources are compilations by the US National Science Board (NSB, 2024) sourced from Scopus (Elsevier, 2024), and the Leiden University (2025) ranking sourced from Web of Science (WoS, 2024).

Growth of networked science

The technological change that made possible the birth of global science, a necessary but not sufficient condition, was the evolution of internet-mediated communications. In *Theory of Society* Niklas Luhmann (2012) notes that the decisive step towards world society was 'the full discovery of the globe as a closed sphere of meaningful communication' (Volume 1, p. 85). After it began in 1989 the internet facilitated the rapid growth of networked sociability. Figure 9.1 tracks the expansion of worldwide internet coverage between 1990 and 2023. This in turn made possible the foundation and expansion of a new global science system.

Nevertheless, global science was not created by technology but by human agents, who used networked sociability to build a scientific space. North American universities had a large presence in the early internet and US-based faculty dominated the first stages of synchronous collaboration, data exchange and global publishing. These conditions of origin meant that global science was patterned by the expansionary dynamics of an open network, and shaped by American faculty norms. These included robust autonomous professional regulation in disciplinary communities whose free bottom-up interactions were independent of direct regulation by government. On the debit side it meant that from the beginning global science embodied an equally robust sense of US-American cultural superiority.

The autonomous dynamics of science are crucial. Governments and institutions are also part of building scientific activity (funding is a necessary

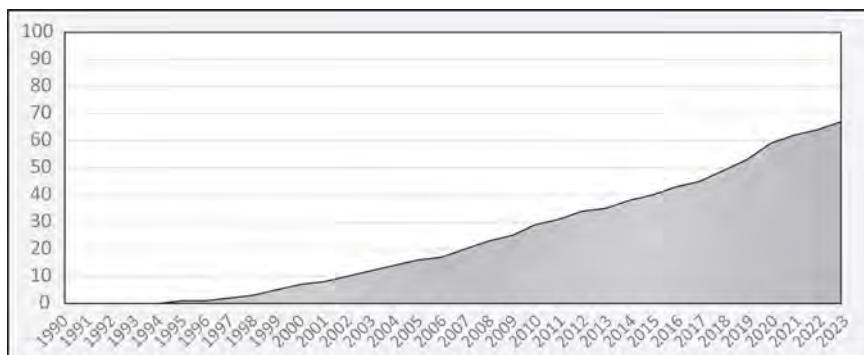


Figure 9.1 Proportion (%) of world population with Internet access: 1990 to 2023.

Source: Author, drawing on data from World Bank, 2024.

though not sufficient condition for most scientific activity) but policy makers, funders and managers cannot themselves make scientific judgements. Science has to be bottom up. This does not mean that science is egalitarian. Scientists are specialists who require many years of expensive training and resources and access to that training is stratified. Capacity and influence in science are not equivalent across the world or in institutions and still less are they equal. Global science is not a level playing field, as will be discussed below.

Since 1996 the number of papers in the global literature has grown by about 5 per cent per year. Published science has doubled every twelve years or so. There has also been rapid growth in the number and proportion of papers with international co-authors; and partly through this, active science has spread to many more countries since the internet began.

Logic of open networks

Networked messages, information and knowledge travel with lightning speed without respect for national borders and innovations spread very rapidly. The network form naturally facilitates the growth of scientific communities. As the number of connections expands the unit cost of new connections falls (Castells, 2000), and by joining the pre-existing network new researchers and new national science systems readily gain access to immense resources. Established institutions and large countries do not gate-keep in the global science system because entering researchers can freely form ties with any other researcher in the network.

The organization may be more open to new members, since greater density of the network and the lowered in-betweenness measures suggest that fewer of the communications pass through the leading nodes or countries ... international cooperation is particularly advantageous for less advanced countries With improved scanning of research and more effective communications, [researchers can] leverage foreign research, data, equipment, and know-how. ... The global network is arguably now a more stable system that serves as a source of vitality and direction to R&D at all lower levels (Wagner et al., 2015)

The fastest growth in collaborative relations in global science has been the growth in co-authored papers involving researchers in different emerging science countries (Choi, 2012). Figure 1.2 in Chapter 1 showed especially rapid growth since 1996 in science papers in China, India and the rest of the world. Established science in the United States, the UK, Germany and Japan grew more

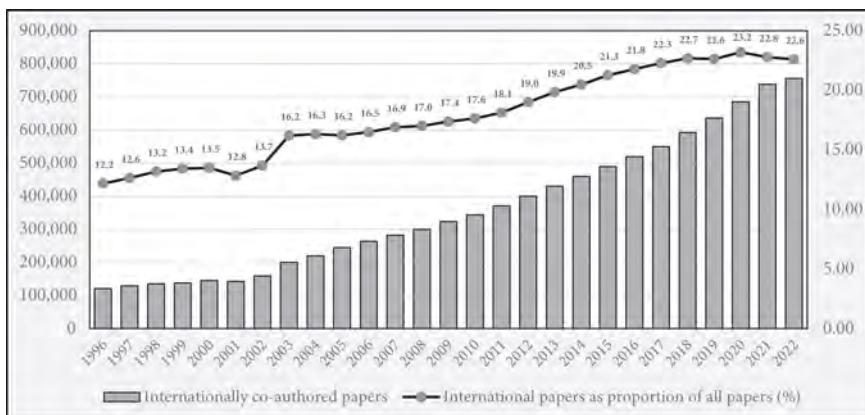


Figure 9.2 Number and proportion (%) of papers in Scopus that were internationally co-authored, World: 1996 to 2022.

Source: Author, drawing on data from NSB (2024). A change to data compilation in 2003 disrupts comparison over the full period.

slowly. The Anglosphere, Western Europe, Russia and Japan once produced nearly all global science, but this is no longer the case, as is discussed below.

Cross-border collaboration and mobility

The number and proportion of papers co-authored in more than one institution in the same country have risen sharply, and papers co-authored in more than one country have risen more rapidly. Figure 9.2 indicates the growth of cross-border papers in Scopus from 1996 to 2022. The proportion of science papers entailing authors from institutions in more than one country jumped from less than 2 per cent of all Web of Science papers in 1970 (Olechnicka et al., 2019), prior to electronic networking, to a high of 23.2 per cent of papers in Scopus in 2020. This declined to 22.6 per cent of papers in 2022 (NSB, 2024), affected by the reduction in US-China collaborations triggered by the US decoupling strategy (Chapter 7).

Why do researchers collaborate internationally? Several answers are offered in the research literature (see e.g. Georghiou, 1998; Birnholtz, 2007; Winkler et al., 2015; Chen et al., 2019). Funding and programme structures can incentivize cooperation. For example, in Europe the conditions of research funding often require cross-country teams. Government policies can also weaken collaboration, as in the decoupling of US science from science in China

(see Chapter 7). Arguably, the intrinsic motives of researchers are a central element. Interviews with scientists suggest that both friendship and knowledge-based motivations are primary. Most researchers want to contribute significantly to discovery and tend to work with others who can add epistemic value. The research literature mentions shared research problems, and respect and trust (Melin, 2000). Disciplinary ties are often strong across borders. Another motivator is potential career gains associated with going global. Asymmetric partnerships between emerging researchers in the global South and researchers in the global North with disciplinary standing and access to research resources often develop through doctoral education. Career-motivated collaboration is referred to as 'preferential attachment' (Wagner and Leydesdorff, 2005).

All of linguistic, cultural, historical, geographic and political proximities can encourage scientific collaboration (Graf and Kalthaus, 2018, p. 1200; Chen et al., 2019). Research co-authorship data (e.g. NSB, 2024) demonstrates often relatively high rates of collaboration between countries with a shared history and/or language (e.g. countries in South America, former British Empire countries), shared political culture (Nordic countries have extensive collaborations) or geographically adjacency (e.g. Poland and Czechia, Ireland and England), though not all contiguous countries collaborate intensively (India and Pakistan do not).

Mobile doctoral students play a large part in the globalization of science, though the cross-border share of doctoral students varies between national systems. In OECD countries it ranges from 57 per cent in Switzerland, 48 per cent in the Netherlands and 41 per cent in the UK to 22 per cent in the United States, Japan and Germany, 17 per cent in South Korea, 10 per cent in Italy and 7 per cent in the fast-growing science system in Turkey (OECD, 2023, p. 259).

National and global science

The development of the global science system has meant that everywhere, there are two systems of science operating together in the same institutions and with many of the same personnel. There are the national science system, and the global science system. They are different in kind. This dual character of science is not always understood, largely because national frameworks are often dominant in shaping imaginaries (see Chapter 7).

Though bottom-up faculty-to-faculty dynamics are more potent in shaping the epistemic content of global science than are the policies and actions of

national governments, in conventional descriptions scientific activity is seen to be organized in separated national systems, as if it is firmly bordered, and the autonomous global relational aspect is invisible. Data describing scientific activity, such as aggregations of published papers, often split the internationally collaborative work on an arbitrary proportional basis between the countries concerned, which can be highly misleading, as the extent to which authors are nationally embedded, the extent to which their contributions are separable not combined, and the balance between separable contributions if they exist, are all highly variable from case to case. It seems that 'the only reality we are able to comprehensively describe statistically is national, or at best international' (Dale, 2005). Yet as Robert May acknowledges in the paper that founded contemporary comparative studies of science almost three decades ago, data on 'comparisons are to a degree confounded because a large and growing fraction of scientific work involves international collaborations' (May, 1997, p. 795).

In a chapter on 'Scientific nationalism in a globalising world', Sa and Sabzalieva (2018) find that the dual science systems are associated with different 'institutional logics' of science, which they label 'scientific nationalism' and 'scientific globalism' (p. 149). The notion of national science as a competitor in the global landscape – a notion articulated in similar terms across most of the twenty national governmental settings they examine – reconciles activity in the two scales from the viewpoint of the nation-state, but does not fully encompass the scientific globalism practised by individual scientists:

Policy orientations and frameworks that emphasise the nation and its capacity to innovate within a competitive global landscape provides the overarching paradigm within which policy actors operate in today's world. This institutional order is so ingrained that it is arguably taken for granted as a global way of thinking about science policy. The convergence between the wide-ranging country settings we examined pays testament to this authority. This contemporary expression of scientific nationalism nevertheless continued to thrive alongside the logic of scientific globalism, which is rooted in the ideas that underpin what academic science is and how it is performed. These normative orientations are part and parcel of scientific culture and are often articulated by researchers in policy discussions. Our analysis of science policy documents demonstrated the tensions and contradictions between these logics that are manifested not only within but between widely varying settings. (Sa and Sabzalieva, 2018, p. 163)

Science is global, local and national simultaneously, and in Europe is regional as well: successive EU Framework programmes have played a major role in developing scientific activity. Activity in one scale is not reduced to or

permanently subordinated to another. There is a division of labour between national and global science. As noted, they are heterogenous, different in kind, with both synergies and tensions between them. These synergies/tensions are historically nested, varying between places and over time. Sometimes the global system appears autonomous vis-à-vis national governments; at other times national funding, policy and regulation intervene more directly to affect global science. Science at the regional level in Europe is more like national science than like global science, in that it is structured through law, regulation, funding and higher education institutions.

Table 9.1, which leaves aside the regional scale, summarizes distinctions between national and global science and the relation between them (see also Marginson, 2022e). National governments and public research agencies are essential to science in the material sense. They provide the infrastructure of universities and government laboratories that house nearly all basic science, part fund those institutions, and largely fund their research projects. They often (though not always) provide a stable policy, legal and regulatory framework. This might suggest that cross-border science, the global science system, is simply an outgrowth of national science. But this would miss the endogenous drivers of global networking, collaboration and creativity. Knowledge and its organization are grounded not in universities or countries but in the disciplines and cross-disciplinary groups in research networks. The global science system is much more than the sum of the different national parts. Its practical autonomy from national authorities creates challenges for them.

National and global science are ordered by contrasting norms, as was noted in Chapter 7. National science policy is shaped according to nation-state objectives of security, prosperity and global competitiveness. The interests and perspective of the nation take priority. Global science is motivated by the professional norms of epistemic practice, which Merton (1942/73) summarized as universalism, meaning the universal character of scientific knowledge regardless of creator identity; communism, meaning that scientific knowledge is a shared common good; disinterestedness, meaning that inquiry is driven not by interest or outcome but by the search for truth; and organized scepticism, meaning that science is routinely subjected to critical scrutiny and tests of falsification before entering the common canon.

The global network has a culture, pathways, and norms of communication specific to its structure, and diverging from national, regional, or disciplinary norms. (Wagner et al., 2017, p. 1646)

Table 9.1 Distinctions and relations between global science system and national science systems

	Global science system	National science systems
Core components	Codified, globally legitimated knowledge, people, networked communications, norms	Institutional structure of science activity ordered and resourced primarily by nation-state
Enabling conditions	Global communications, resources, institutions, and (often national) agencies/policies/rules	Sufficient political and economic stability and policy commitment to science activity
Main functions	Production, codification and legitimization, circulation, of new shared knowledge in English (inclusion/exclusion function)	Legal, political, financial conditions of science. New national knowledge, new applications of knowledge
Boundary	World society, but only some knowledge and knowledge producers are included	Nation-state, limits of activity are set by state policies and willingness to fund
Normative centre	No normative centre. Diffuse disciplinary community of persons sharing knowledge	Normatively centred on state and institutions
Norms of practice	Mertonian scientific norms: universalism, communism (science as a common good), disinterestedness, organized scepticism	Science that serves national goals of security, prosperity and advance of the nation's global competitiveness
Growth dynamics	Continually expands to all possible networked connections, intensifies existing connections ('edges')	Growth is less inherently dynamic, being determined by national policy and funding, and industry take-up of research
Social-relational	Collegial scientists in professional organizations, forums and networks	Government agencies, research organizations and institutions, networked scientists in national and local scales
Regulation	Local self-regulation using global collegial scientific norms (norms of dominant science nations)	National law, official regulation, policy, financing systems, cultural norms
Division of labour	Knowledge potential of global science stimulates national system building and state funding	National science provides institutions, personnel, resources essential to global science

Source: Author.

Collaboration has grown for reasons independent of the needs and policies of the state ... This dynamic system, operating orthogonally to national systems, is increasingly difficult to influence and even less amenable to governance as it grows ... nations must learn to manage and benefit from a network. (Wagner et al., 2015, p. 2, 12)

National science is firmly centred by the nation-state, by governments. Global science has no normative centre in the juridical sense. It is regulated not by rules and funding but by voluntary networked cooperation, and the shared norms and protocols that govern scientific work: it is culturally normed. It is affected by national governments but outside them.

At the same time, while global and national science are different, they are also connected and heavily overlap. Much scientific activity is multiple in scalar terms in that it is present in both scales simultaneously. Scientists who lead their global discipline also mostly lead institutional science and hold national responsibilities. Knowledge generated originally for national government or commercial purposes can transfer into the global conversation. Reciprocally, globally sourced knowledge becomes part of national scientific, governmental and industrial agendas. Since the foundation of the internet, national governments have mostly seen global science and international scientific collaboration as beneficial for parties at national level. International collaboration by nationally based personnel brings government itself into touching distance of innovations in science and technology. Yet because national governments do not wholly control global science it entails risks for them. Because each national government is nested in its own political culture with its own trajectory and agenda, its approach to global science is also distinctive, and can vary.

The sciences develop internationally, but the funding is mainly national.
(Bornmann et al., 2018, p. 931)

... international and national networks may be shaping each other in a process of co-evolution between the national institutional structure and the global network. The relative influences of national and international networks appear to vary among nations. (Wagner et al., 2015, p. 11)

It is a complex relationship. When nations treated science as a common human endeavour, focused on shared global problems such as climate change or epidemic diseases, so that 'scientific globalism' prevails, the relationship is more seamless. However, when nations treat science as a tool of scientific nationalism or 'techno-nationalism' (Cantwell and Grimm, 2018), global science and national science may pull different ways.

Nation-bound agendas limit what science can achieve when they lead to reductions in or blockages of global scientific cooperation. Scientific nationalism is often associated not just with the pursuit of national interest rather than disinterested science, but also with methodological nationalism (see Chapters 1 and 7), whereby scientific activity is seen as simply an outgrowth of one or another nation-state and the dynamics of the global system are invisible. For example, governments often hope that by investing in science within national universities and other agencies they will foster innovation in the national economy. However, unless the national scientific and industry infrastructures are each very large (this is the case in China and the United States but not elsewhere), on the balance of probability, nationally generated science entering the global pool is more likely to be used by foreign not national capital; while innovations by national industry are mostly sourced in foreign not nationally located science. (In any case, most research is 'altruistic' in the sense that it is not focused on economic development or national security at all: Klavans and Boyack, 2017.)

So that is the relation between global science and national science. Nations have resource power and legal power. The global system has knowledge power. They often work together and can also pull apart. Next the chapter will unpack the earlier statement: 'science is not a level playing field', with reference to Gramsci's (1971) concept of hegemony.

Diverse capacity and multipolarity

As noted, contributions to global science are uneven. The chapter now examines where the leading science is located, with 'leading' defined in terms of numbers of high citation papers. Citations are a problematic measure of research quality (see the critical reviews of the measure in Waltman, 2016; Tahamtan and Bornmann, 2019) but they do indicate recognition.

Leading science universities

Table 9.2, from the Leiden ranking, lists the twenty-five research universities with the most highly cited papers published between 2019 and 2022 inclusive (Leiden University, 2025). This list includes thirteen universities from China, seven from the United States, three from the UK, one from Canada and one from Singapore. In the top ten there are six from China, two from the United States, one from the UK and three from Canada. There are no non-UK European

Table 9.2 Leading universities in high citation science (papers in top 5 per cent of their research field by citation), Web of Science papers: 2019 to 2022 inclusive

University	Country	Top 5% papers	All papers	% papers in top 5% in field	Cross-border papers*	% of all papers cross-border
Harvard U	USA	4,223	36,654	11.5%	52,451	55.4%
Zhejiang U	China	2,331	37,457	6.2%	19,648	29.3%
Tsinghua U	China	2,068	24,574	8.4%	18,267	35.0%
Shanghai Jiao Tong U	China	2,045	35,373	5.8%	19,393	29.5%
Stanford U	USA	2,030	18,017	11.3%	21,986	48.3%
Huazhong U S&T	China	1,801	27,549	6.5%	11,490	25.0%
U Toronto	Canada	1,760	25,439	6.9%	33,703	60.9%
U Oxford	UK	1,739	17,206	10.1%	34,141	72.1%
Central Southern U	China	1,549	27,615	5.6%	10,810	23.8%
Peking U	China	1,545	22,496	6.9%	17,361	35.3%
Sichuan U	China	1,488	29,536	5.0%	9,972	21.8%
U College London	UK	1,476	16,712	8.8%	27,562	73.3%
U Chinese Acad S	China	1,462	22,661	6.5%	25,796	25.7%
U Michigan	USA	1,459	20,004	7.3%	19,508	42.1%
U Cambridge	UK	1,449	14,524	10.0%	28,022	72.3%
Sun Yat-sen U	China	1,440	25,858	5.6%	14,883	28.9%
U Pennsylvania	USA	1,439	17,207	8.4%	17,087	40.5%
Johns Hopkins U	USA	1,437	18,841	7.6%	22,991	47.0%
MIT	USA	1,375	10,254	13.4%	18,297	59.0%
Xi'an Jiaotong U	China	1,349	24,574	5.5%	12,488	29.4%
Wuhan U	China	1,347	20,191	6.7%	9,600	26.8%
National U Singapore	Singapore	1,289	14,154	9.1%	25,591	73.3%
Fudan U	China	1,281	23,067	5.6%	12,760	28.2%
Harbin IT	China	1,272	21,190	6.0%	8,615	24.3%
Cornell U	USA	1,270	13,983	9.1%	17,038	50.0%

* Data for total papers and top 5 per cent papers are based on fractional count: a single unit value of one per paper is allocated between different institutions on a proportional basis (two co-authors each = 0.5). Data for internationally collaborative papers are based on total paper count, so that each author (regardless of the total number) = 1. U= University, S&T = Science and Technology, Acad S = Academy of Sciences, IT = Institute of Technology

Source: Leiden University (2025).

universities in the top 10 or top 25 because the measure is partly size dependent and European research universities are typically smaller than universities in the Anglosphere and China.

Global science is led from familiar universities where reputation, resources and talent are concentrated. Nominally, high citation data capture the quantity of quality (science firepower) in these institutions: performance combines scientific merit with size. The top 25 list has changed dramatically. Six years earlier there were seventeen from the United States, four from the UK, two from Canada, none from Singapore and two from China in 20th and 24th position. Harvard has held its leading position, largely because of the weight of research in its medical school, but otherwise American universities are being displaced by Chinese counterparts.

Table 9.2 also shows that these leading universities are extensively networked. US universities are more engaged in cross-border collaboration than China's. In other countries in the Anglosphere, and in Europe, the proportion of papers internationally co-authored is much higher than in either the United States or China. There are many potential national co-authors in the United States and China; and because European research funding requires cross-country bids, it is common for two thirds of a regional university's papers to be internationally co-authored.

Global pluralization of science capacity

Growing open networked science provides favourable conditions for the diversification of capacity, and the expansionary network has coincided with state-building, university building and growing investments in science. The number of countries generating 90 per cent of science increased from twenty in 1987 to thirty-three in 2022. Researchers from fifty-nine countries produced over 5,000 science papers in 2022 and other countries were approaching that level (NSB, 2024).

All of these countries had viable endogenous science systems, with locally trained doctoral graduates in at least some disciplines, that were connected to the common global system. There are now many such science countries outside Euro-America. Total output in China massively exceeds the United States. India has passed Germany, UK and Japan to become third producer in volume terms. Brazil, Iran, Turkey and South Korea have large-scale infrastructure and output (NSB, 2024). However, pluralization has gone significantly further than this.

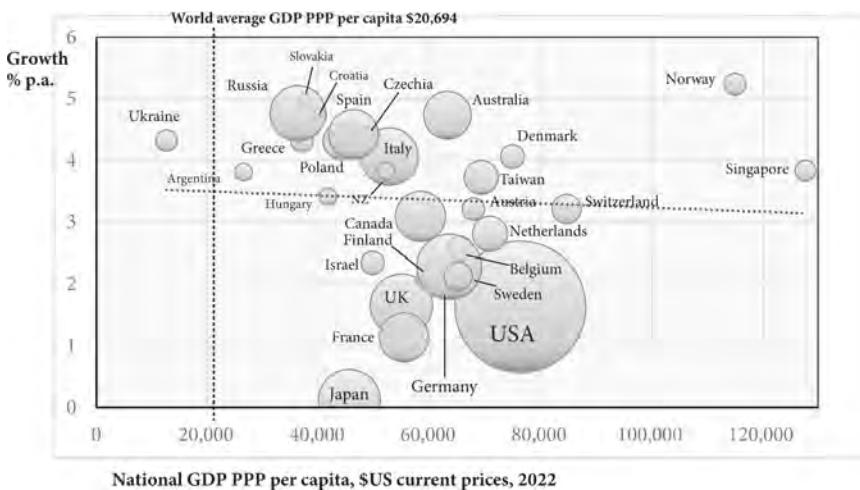


Figure 9.3 Science output growing SLOWER than world average rate (5.38% per annum) in 2003 to 2022.

Source: Author, drawing on data from World Bank (2025); NSB (2024); Statistics Times (2024). Countries producing more than 5,000 papers in 2022. NZ = New Zealand.

The global diversification of scientific capacity is clearer in Figures 9.3 and 9.4, which present two contrasting groups of national science systems. In these charts, the volume of national science output is indicated by the size of the ball. The vertical axis shows the rate of annual growth in the number of science papers from 2003 to 2022. The horizontal axis shows national income per head, a rough measure of the material capacity for science. The dotted line is the world average income per head in 2022. Figure 9.3 shows science systems that grew *more slowly* than the world average rate of growth of 5.38 per cent per year, systems that were all established prior to 2003. They are mainly located in Western countries with incomes well above the world average – only one slower growing system in Figure 9.3, Ukraine, had a GDP per head in 2022 below the world average.

The second chart in Figure 9.4 shows national systems where science output increased *faster* than the world average rate, mostly relatively new science powers. Some saw truly spectacular growth – almost 15.6 per cent per year in Iran, a large science system with 60,940 papers in 2022, not far short of France, and an incredible 26.2 per cent in Indonesia where papers grew from 387 in 2003 to 31,947 in 2022. Further, consider the diversification in terms of the economic indicator. Nearly half of the fast-growing science countries had incomes per head below the world average, including Ethiopia with only \$2,813 in 2022, Nigeria (\$5,862), Pakistan (\$6,351) and Bangladesh (\$7,398). Like mass higher

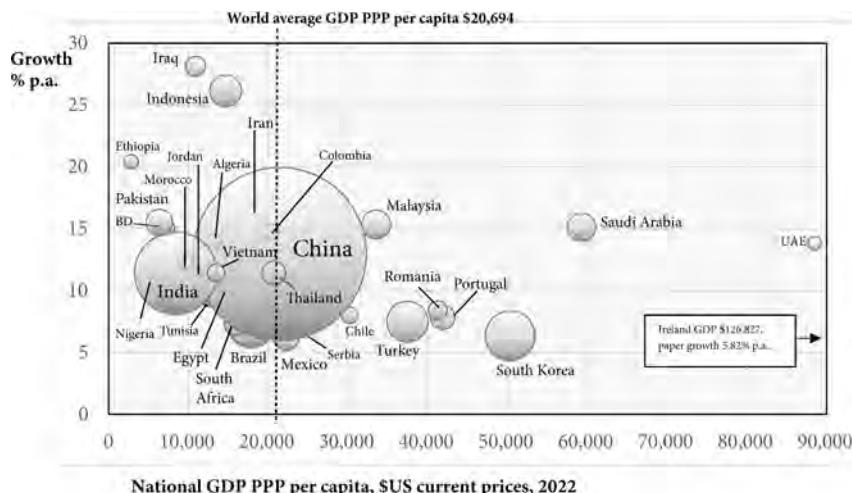


Figure 9.4 Science output growing FASTER than world average rate (5.38% per annum) in 2003 to 2022.

Source: Author, drawing on data from World Bank (2025); NSB (2024); Statistics Times (2024). Countries producing more than 5,000 papers in 2022 only. BD = Bangladesh, UAE = United Arab Emirates.

education (Cantwell et al., 2018), scientific capability has spread to middle-income countries and some low-income countries as well. This is empowering in the emerging countries.

Leading science in the disciplines

Pluralization at the top of science is clearer when the individual universities that lead in top 5 per cent papers are examined more closely. The top half of Table 9.3 lists high citation papers in 2019 to 2022 inclusive in two discipline clusters, physical sciences and engineering on the left, mathematics and computing on the right. These lists are absolutely dominated by China. The two leading Singapore universities also figure at the top end of STEM research.

Again, there has been a dramatic worldwide shift. Only six years earlier, eleven of the top fourteen universities in physical sciences and engineering were from the United States and one from China. Now thirteen are from China and one, MIT, is from the United States. It is not that American science has declined. Rather the leading Chinese universities, fed by annual growth in state funding since the 1990s, have moved past the United States. China is just as dominant in mathematics and the associated computing research. Chinese universities are also relatively strong in the conglomerate cluster of life and earth sciences research.

Table 9.3 Top universities in scientific research by discipline, Leiden ranking: 2019 to 2022 inclusive

Number of papers in top 5 per cent of field by citation rate in (1) physical sciences and engineering, (2) mathematics and computing, (3) biomedical and health sciences, (4) life and earth sciences

University	System	(1) Physical sciences & Engineering	University	System	(2) Maths & Computing
Tsinghua U	CHINA	1,160	U Electron S&T	CHINA	480
Zhejiang U	CHINA	871	Tsinghua U	CHINA	416
Shanghai Jiao Tong U	CHINA	865	Xidian U	CHINA	305
Harbin IT	CHINA	792	Harbin IT	CHINA	303
U Science & Technology	CHINA	772	Wuhan U	CHINA	283
Huazhong U S&T	CHINA	761	Huazhong U S&T	CHINA	282
Tianjin U	CHINA	752	Shanghai Jiao Tong U	CHINA	272
Xi'an Jiaotong U	CHINA	750	Southeastern U	CHINA	263
U Chinese Academy Sci	CHINA	703	Zhejiang U	CHINA	260
Central Southern U	CHINA	649	Beihang U	CHINA	255
Chongqing	CHINA	604	Northwestern Poly U	CHINA	239
Hunan U	CHINA	591	Xi'an Jiaotong U	CHINA	227
Northwestern Poly U	CHINA	576	Nanyang TU	SINGAPORE	225
MIT	USA	569	Beijing IT	CHINA	221

University	System	(3) Biomed & Health Sciences	University	System	(4) Life & Earth Sciences
Harvard U	USA	3,039	China Agriculture U	CHINA	451
U Toronto	CANADA	1,108	Northwest Ag & For	CHINA	388
Johns Hopkins U	USA	1,099	Zhejiang U	CHINA	387
Stanford U	USA	1,018	U Chinese Acad Sci	CHINA	365
U Pennsylvania	USA	1,002	Wageningen U	NETHERLANDS	302
U Calif San Fran	USA	888	Nanjing Agricultur U	CHINA	285
U College London	UK	839	Huazhong Agricul U	CHINA	248
U Oxford	UK	823	Tsinghua U	CHINA	246
U Michigan	USA	807	Peking U	CHINA	243
Yale U	USA	748	Wuhan U	CHINA	240
Shanghai Jiao Tong U	CHINA	742	U Calif Davis	USA	228
Zhejiang U	CHINA	734	U Florida	USA	226
Sun Yat-sen U	CHINA	715	Beijing Normal U	CHINA	225
U Calif San Diego	USA	711	Harvard U	USA	213

Source: Leiden University (2025).

Until recently it was a different story in biomedicine and health sciences, with the list monopolized by universities from the Anglosphere, but there are now three Chinese universities in that world top 14 table.

Prior to the late 2010s the evolution of China's science was assisted by open mutually funded engagement with US science within the framework of a national collaboration agreement. China's rise was long welcomed in the United States, which never imagined that China's top STEM universities would outdo MIT, Harvard, Stanford and Berkeley in high citation research. As discussed in Chapter 7, the rise of China's science and technological potential triggered anxiety in the United States sufficient to drive the decoupling strategy in order to retard China. However, while the partial truncation of collaboration must slow research in both countries, China's accomplished research system, like that of the United States, is now able to propel itself.

Hegemony in global science

While scientific infrastructure and researcher capability have become more pluralized in the global scale, the cultural content of knowledge has not. Rising stars in China and Singapore excel by being good at Euro-American (Western) and predominantly English-language science. The global repositories are structured by Western epistemic categories. Western knowledge in English appears as universal knowledge, while other languages and knowledge are cast as provincial with solely localized meaning and value. Does this mean that Western knowledge is intrinsically superior as a domain of creativity? No. Just as the global material infrastructure in science has been built by human society, so have its cultural forms.

As discussed in Chapter 7, Antonio Gramsci (1971) distinguishes coercive power from hegemonic power based on consent, while also locating education and science in the larger map of national and global power. The theorization of hegemony explains how dominant forms and ideas are bedded down in global science without the necessity for coercion. Drawing on the idea of hegemony, in *Power: A Radical View* (2021) Steven Lukes discusses the mobilization of bias, and control over processes and agendas. Notably, agents in non-hegemonic countries who are overhung by hegemony also invest in it. While in science Anglophone agents draw clear material and psychic benefits from asymmetric relations, including the labour of non-Western scientists, the latter 'consent to the terms of the game as if they were their own', becoming complicit in their

own subordination (Fonseca, 2016, p. 81). They may have little choice, if the alternative is to exit the science system. Still, some also press for change within it.

Mechanisms of control

The dominance of Western knowledge is reproduced less by Western states than by autonomous Western science itself, in the day-to-day operations of scientists and their universities, in conjunction with the global publishing companies. Western and especially Anglo-American institutions house most of the leading scientists who shape notions of value, measures of performance and bases of comparison. Academic journal editors determine legitimate global science, interacting also with bibliometric companies that codify inclusions. Knowledge is rank ordered in terms of value and prestige. First, some knowledge is selected as legitimate and other knowledge is excluded. Second, there is a hierarchy of value within the selected global knowledge based on citation counts and journal orders calibrated by impact factors. Global science is real knowledge but that knowledge and its associated prestige are socially defined, and much other knowledge is excluded altogether.

Publishing. Science publishing is largely monopolized by five companies: Elsevier, SpringerNature, Taylor and Francis, Wiley-Blackwell and Sage. Like research they operate freely across national borders. The networked scientific world provides publishers with their essential conditions of operation. Publishers extract papers from the larger body of formal and informal knowledge for digitally based revenue creation. Though knowledge is a non-market public good generated in non-profit universities and research institutes, via publishing these companies transform it into something that they own. They seek profit and market share as ends in themselves, absorbing academic networks, growing and diversifying journals and users, and differentiating value in the manner of markets. In their hands open access publishing is another way of monetarizing science, via author processing charges. Peer review systems that sanction and differentiate the value of papers as science are managed digitally in publisher platforms and increasingly regulated by them.

Publishers actively encourage the ‘publish or perish growth’ of science regardless of content or originality because it expands market share and profitability. Is science thereby subsumed into capitalist production? Largely not. Mostly scientists have not become wage labour for publishers. Publishers do not produce knowledge, though they are parasitic on knowledge and its internal epistemic value system. But the publishers affect the rhythms of production of

knowledge and closely affect its use as a tool of institutional, national, economic and cultural power. As Chapter 2 noted, economic public goods are often captured, controlled and deployed by powerful social groups.

Bibliometrics. Bibliometrics enable the creation of a quasi-economy of science in which all outputs are assigned shadow values. Books play a minor role in bibliometric collections as journal papers are more amenable to rank ordering based on peer review, selectivity and citation impact, and more readily accessed by users, lending themselves to commodification.

Metrics in this quasi-economy are deployed to regulate the comparative value of individuals, academic units, institutions and countries. Bibliometric data, aggregated and analysed, underpin scientometric studies of science. Bibliometrics have acquired their own momentum. Yet they rest on hegemonic decisions about inclusion and legitimacy that are made in the disciplines.

University rankings. A crucial part of the quasi-economy of science is global university rankings (see also Chapter 7). The main component of the rankings is bibliometric data. Research metrics directly determine most of the Shanghai and Times Higher ranking and the prestige effects of research metrics also indirectly determine the surveys used by Times Higher Education and QS (ARWU, 2025; THE, 2025; QS, 2025) (see Table 9.4). Rankings turn bibliometrics into the recognized hierarchy of universities, in which universities in the Anglosphere

Table 9.4 The role of the main bibliometric collections in global ranking of universities

Rankings	Publication-related indicators as proportion %	Databases
Shanghai Jiaotong Academic Ranking of World Universities (China)	70.0	Clarivate Analytics' Web of Science
Times Higher Education World University Rankings (UK)	38.5*	Elsevier's Scopus
QS World University Rankings (UK)	20.0*	Elsevier's Scopus
Leiden Ranking (Netherlands)	100.0	Clarivate Analytics' Web of Science
Best Global Universities (US)	72.5	Clarivate Analytics' Web of Science

* Beyond bibliometrics, research performance has a further, indirect but important, effect through its impact on the surveys used by THE and QS, and in THE data on postgraduate studies and income – arguably, in total research performance constitutes more than two thirds of the THE index (Marginson, 2014b).

are still largely dominant, despite now being eclipsed by universities from China on some research measures. This construction of science has moved a long way from the shared joys of grass-roots scientific collaboration. The collegial decisions of peer reviewers are not only monetarized by publishers, they are also used to reproduce global university hierarchies.

Global cultural hegemony

The mechanisms of hegemony in science are the outcome of a long evolution. The preponderance of Western knowledge has historical roots in 500 years of colonial domination and the patterning of universities and science on the basis of Western models; primarily drawn from the dominant powers of the last 250 years, Great Britain and the United States.

Yet much knowledge foundational to the Euro-American episteme originated in non-Western countries later seized or dominated by the West. For long the leading zones in mathematics and astronomy were India and Islamic West Asia. The origin of zero in mathematics is disputed between advocates for India and for China. Song China created and disseminated keystone technologies such as the nautical compass and gunpowder. China began the widespread use of paper. Metal-based printing started in Korea. These non-Western roots are hidden beneath assumptions about natural Western superiority.

It is not surprising that countries dominant in terms of military power, economics and politics have set the norms and protocols of global science. What may seem more surprising is that Western control of the academic contents of global knowledge, still almost absolute, has persisted longer than Western economic dominance. Nevertheless, there are precedents for the partial autonomy of cultural power. Control systems based on language and cultural uniformity have persisted for very long periods. Consider the Qin Dynasty's (221–206 BCE) standardization of written language in China, facilitating a unified polity that along with the written language has patterned Sinic political culture since. Europe saw the universalizing role of Latin and the long-lasting cultural-political authority of the medieval Catholic Church.

Not all systems of rule have rested on mono-cultural uniformity. Certain states, empires and civilizations (e.g. ancient Persia, ancient Rome, the Mongol domination) have been multi-lingual and fostered inter-cultural mixing and diversity as well as a leading language. However, the West has opted for

uniformity in science and this approach has become more entrenched over time. Even European languages other than English (French, German and Russian have all been global languages of science) are now marginalized.

Knowledge that is excluded

Global science is a system of open collaborative knowledge creation grounded in disciplinary networks, annexed to institutional and geopolitical power as an instrument of control. It is reproduced in circular fashion by national science infrastructures, leading universities, leading scientists, publishing companies, bibliometric companies, university rankings. It is neo-imperial. It reproduces a cultural hierarchy inherited from colonialism, which nurtures the idea that certain cultures, languages, countries, places and institutions, and the people associated with each, are especially valued: more creative, more scientific, more universal.

What falls outside the charmed circle? Everything else. First, the research-based 'grey literature' generated in all countries in government, business and social organizations. Second, most research and scholarship largely for local or national use. Third, most work in the social sciences and humanities, partly because of its contextualized character but also because of lingering suspicions in STEM circles that these are not worthy knowledges. Fourth, nearly all academic knowledge in languages other than English. Fifth, Indigenous knowledge from all over the world.

English is the first language of 4.7 per cent of the world's people, third after Putonghua (Chinese) at 11.6 per cent and Spanish 5.9 per cent. English is the first or second language of 18.2 per cent (Ethnologue, 2018). Of the periodicals in Ulrich's comprehensive directory 69 per cent are in English yet English has 80 per cent of journals in Scopus, 89 per cent in the WoS Science Citation Index Expanded (SCIE) and 90 per cent in the Social Sciences Citation Index (SSCI). Ulrichs lists 9,857 scholarly journals in Chinese: forty-two are in WoS (UlrichsWeb, 2021). In WoS, 95.37 per cent of all publications are in English; in Scopus 92.64 per cent. Spanish is second in WoS with 1.26 per cent, Chinese in Scopus with 2.76 per cent (Vera-Baceta et al., 2019).

If knowledge is regarded as a global public good, as most economists argue, or as a global common good, then global science system raises the question 'whose public/common good?' For scholars and students who speak, say, Bahasa Indonesian, then English as the single common global language is a shared good in that it facilitates common conversations, but a public bad given that it

marginalizes knowledge in Bahasa Indonesian at global level. The hegemonic system devalues knowledge in Bahasa even in Bahasa-speaking settings. The divide between knowledge inside and outside global science is the old colonial divide between the dominant powers and the rest. The languages of the colonized are all excluded.

... the understanding of the world by far exceeds the Western understanding of the world and therefore our knowledge of globalization is much less global than globalization itself ... the more non-Western understandings of the world are identified, the more evident it becomes that there are still many others to be identified and hybrid understandings, mixing Western and non-Western components, are virtually infinite ... the diversity of the world is inexhaustible and such diversity still lacks an adequate epistemology. In other words, the epistemological diversity of the world does not yet have a form. (de Sousa Santos, 2007, pp. 64–6)

de Sousa Santos (2007) calls it a 'radical denial of copresence' (p. 48). He 'confronts the monoculture of modern science with the ecology of knowledges' (p. 66). Stein (2021) states that 'systemic forms of domination are not just national and epistemic, but also ontological – that is, they sanction particular modes of existence, and foreclose others' (p. 1779). Though the English-speaking countries do not monopolize all wisdom or have all the answers, other answers are hidden. The cultural hegemony, the English monoculture and the hierarchical ordering of knowledge on the basis of citations, journal hierarchies and university rankings are much criticized outside the West. Latin American scholars point out that when science is defined as work in English, this makes Latin American universities seem impoverished. Yet that is wrong. When work in Spanish and Portuguese is included the picture becomes very different (Vessuri et al., 2014).

The mainstream has been self built on the supposition that outside there is backwardness and lack of academic value ... The publishing system has become determinant in the distribution of scientific recognition by reinforcing a hierarchy built on the basis of a triple principle: institutional development, discipline and proficiency in English. (Beigel, 2014)

For Africa see among others Mbembe (2016), Nyamnjoh (2019). Hegemonic power does not stop broad-based scientific development but it generates a large hinterland, a 'non-scientific' other, of excluded knowledge, including diverse endogenous/Indigenous understandings of land, nature and ecology. Much is lost by blocking out this human experience.

Conclusions

Since the internet began global science has been open, largely free to evolve, and has facilitated diverse national nodes and scientific voices. Science can talk truth to power, cutting across much rubbish in the political space and social media, the fake news and manipulative populism. The reflexivity of science, its mode of judgement, is the test of truth. This is tremendously valuable. Yet amid a moving and multiple ontology global science is culturally fixed, exclusively Western in its traditions, language and norms. There is no fit between the post-colonial distribution of capacity and the inherited neo-colonial structure of institutional and cultural power. Further, global collaboration is vulnerable to being undermined by sharper geopolitical tensions and assertion of national interests (see Chapter 7). Geopolitics threatens to undermine the autonomy of science, lock it into national silos and fragment the global system. These factors place the future of global science in question.

Science must grapple with its paradox. Open networking and universal inclusion are regulated on culturally singular terms, decisively privileging some agents over others. This power structure has passed its use-by date. The truth telling potentials of multiplicity are unduly constrained. They are ultimately unstoppable. Multiplicity always breaks out of spatial closure. But that day needs to be hurried. It is essential to strengthen the common global conversation, making it more difficult to suborn knowledge to capricious national interests and the ebb and flow of geopolitics, and this can only be done by a turn to multiplicity.

There are important gains in a common language for science. The gain is much reduced in terms of both epistemic richness and geopolitical justice when the conversation harshly privileges knowledge in that single language to the exclusion of all other ways of seeing, all other imaginaries. However, the benefits of both commonality and diversity are in reach.

The essential steps are (a) to translate all knowledge produced in other languages into the common global language and make both the original and global version accessible; (b) to adopt multi-lingual publishing in which all knowledge produced in the main languages of use is published simultaneously in the other main languages of use. The software, facilitated by machine learning, can do this. There are subtle problems of translation in some fields. But multi-lingual publishing would be a great step forward. It would

be transformative, breaking the singular cultural hegemony in science and emancipating knowledge everywhere.

* * * * *

The autonomy of science must be defended, from technological nationalism and from the shaping influence of commercial publishers. Science must be spread wider and opened further, not closed. It is vital to maintain lines of communication between all scientists – no cold war in science – and equally vital to bring in all voices, all the different ways of seeing, all the insights and ideas, the whole ecology of knowledges. Chapters 10 and 11 take that discussion further.

Control by Definition: Neocolonial 'Internationalization'

The closed geographical imagination of openness, just as much as that of closure, is itself irretrievably unstable.

~ Doreen Massey, *For Space*, 2005, Sage, p. 175

Chapter 7 introduced the shared global higher education space, its open possibilities, and the geopolitics that attempt to close down that space and its emerging multipolar order. Chapter 8 empirically reviewed understandings of the global space in England, including the self-positioning of national higher education. The UK is highly dependent on profit-generating international education, entailing large-scale transfers of capital from the global South and East to the UK, because of the evacuation of the public good funding of domestic British education. A funding compact based on an extreme form of sovereign individualism (first degrees 100 per cent funded by the student consumer) is matched by sovereign nationalism at global level (international education skewed to the interests of the neocolonial nation). Chapter 9 on global relations in research and science discussed the tension between on one hand the continuing Western and Anglo-American cultural dominance in codified published science, and on the other hand the multipolar capability of higher education across the world. It is extraordinary that the world is still waiting for a multi-lingual knowledge system.

This chapter examines how in the last three decades the 'internationalization' of higher education institutions and practices has been constructed discursively to shape Western-led practices as universal, blocking the possibility of alternative, multiple practices of global relations in education.



Introduction: The Knight definition of ‘internationalization’

In a globally connected world in which a jigsaw of nation-states leads social organization, a word is needed for the growth of educational relations across national borders.¹ The literal term is ‘internationalization’; which after the Second World War became associated with a particular way of understanding the relations between nations (*inter-national* relations), in the proceedings of multilateral organizations and in academic disciplines such as international relations. But in policy and higher education research, the word has been neither clear in meaning nor unproblematic in use. First, higher education includes more than one kind of activity beyond the nation-state. There is both international activity such as student mobility between bordered nations, and global activity that transcends national boundaries, as in science, and online learning programmes. Second, the term ‘internationalization’ has been used normatively to shape higher education in particular ways.

This chapter is a work of critical scholarship that explores and explains the building of what became the dominant understanding of ‘internationalization’ in higher education in the 1990s and after and identifies the problems, contradictions and limits of that project. This is the definition of internationalization formed by Jane Knight in Canada in the 1990s, hereafter the Knight definition, reshaped successively by Knight and colleagues over the next two decades, that has been very widely used by practitioners, institutions, governments, corporations and also researchers of cross-border higher education.

The chapter reflects critically on both the geopolitics and the spatiality of the definition project. Knight discursively separates global economic relations and global higher education relations, though the border breaks down in practice, and also opposes global relations to international relations, which again does not work. She attempts to unify the broad field of cross-border practice while asserting a particular Western approach to cross-border relations, which is a nation-bound education-centred liberal internationalism. The chapter is grounded in a reading of Knight’s papers since 1993 and a selection of works by her collaborators and critics. It focuses only on the discursive practices associated with this particular (albeit highly significant) knowledge-making project and does not review and compare other definitions of internationalization, or develop a new universal

¹ The author thanks Susan Roberston, whose critical reading and the phrase ‘jigsaw of nation-states’ enhanced an earlier version of this chapter.

definition. Rather, the focus is on the origins and structuring of this idea, its evolving purposes and how it has been 'interacted with and transformed' in the world (Robertson, 2021, p. 169).

Archer (1995; 2007) distinguishes between persons, agents and actors. Persons are reflective people moving through the world. Agents have aims and resources. Actors occupy a role within a field or organization, a role independent of the person (Robertson, 2021, pp. 168–9). In education policy and practice, and parallel fields, some knowledge producers come to take particular epistemic roles, as organic intellectuals. Their ideas gain currency and are joined to agents – often in organizations or states – with their interests, resources and practices. The wider the spread of the idea the more diverse such associations become. The idea can become at least partly decoupled from the originating person(s). This chapter reflects on the idea and actor rather than the person. It is confined to the knowledge politics of the Knight definition and does not review Knight's scholarship as a whole, for example her work on education hubs (Knight, 2014) and knowledge diplomacy (Knight, 2019).

While Knight's name continues to be closely associated with one definition of internationalization of higher education, that definition has come to carry a larger set of meanings and associations, some not intended by Knight herself, as will be discussed.

'Definitions can shape policy'

Announcing the second version of her definition Knight (2003) states that 'definitions can shape policy' (p. 2). In discussing 'globalization' Scholte (2008) remarks that 'definition is not everything, but everything involves definition. Knowledge of globalization is substantially a function of how the word is defined', necessitating 'a careful and critical examination of the term itself'. A sharp definition provides recurring insight and helps to guide practice. By the same token 'a muddled or misguided core concept compromises our overall comprehension of the problem' (p. 1471). This advice applies equally to the term 'internationalization'.

The second version of Knight's definition is the most widely used:

Internationalization at the national, sector and institutional levels is defined as the process of integrating an international, intercultural or global dimension into the purpose, functions or delivery of post-secondary education. (Knight, 2004a, p. 11)

This single totemic sentence has become so well-known as to be seemingly innocuous and commonplace. Yet the definition contains a tautology (internationalization integrates the international) and conceals a raft of assumptions, judgements, problems and issues.

The Knight definition has been very frequently cited in research and official documents, especially in the Anglosphere and Western Europe. At the time of writing this chapter² the most cited papers in the definition's first decade (Knight, 1994; Knight and de Wit, 1995) totalled 2,329 Google Scholar citations and the most cited papers in the second decade, on the 'updated definition' (Knight, 2003; Knight, 2004a) had 7,694 citations between them, while a co-authored Knight paper on the internationalization of higher education (Altbach and Knight, 2007) had 6,291 citations. A content analysis of the *Journal of Studies in International Education* by Bedenlier et al. (2018) identifies the 1994 and 1995 papers as foundational to the field of international education research (p. 118) and notes that Knight sole or shared authored the most highly cited works in the field (pp. 114–15).

The Knight definition has been adopted by the Organisation of Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD, 2007, p. 23), and numerous governments and sector organizations like the International Association of Universities, American Council on Education (e.g. ACE, 2015), and Universities UK. It is often quoted on the websites of universities where they parade their international programmes. This is a level of visible impact most scholars can only dream of. Knight's definition is more unanimously supported by organizations than scholars, being avoided by many researchers who explicitly investigate global relations in higher education. (Likewise scholars using Knight's definition rarely reference scholars who specifically focus on the global: the two conversations are largely separate.) Nevertheless, a few scholars have openly critiqued the Knight definition (some are discussed below). This combination of widespread open endorsement and largely unexpressed dissent indicates that Knight's project and wording have exercised a discursive 'hegemony' in Gramsci's (1971) sense.

However, influential ideas should be subjected to ongoing critical interrogation, given that no knowledge is complete and theories of the world can and must be viewed as fallible. Ideas should not take on the mantle of a fundamentalist orthodoxy. The present chapter finds the Knight definition is unable to adequately understand cross-border education so as to underpin research and scholarship. Nor can it shape practice as its proponents want. It

² 10 December 2024.

is overly normative and insufficiently explanatory, uses a truncated geography, claims a universality that cannot be achieved, and when applied in the practices of Euro-American higher education has regressive implications in the non-Euro-American world.

These statements are evidenced and discussed below. The next section of the chapter critically reviews the definition in three phases: origins in the 1990s; the challenge of global knowledge economy ideas in the 2000s, which triggered limited modifications in the definition; and the accumulating crisis of meaning among advocates of the definition in the 2010s. The discussion section expands on the definition's limitations and offers another kind of explanation of cross-border relations in higher education, which foregrounds reciprocal relationality.

An idea in three phases

This section tracks the evolution of the Knight definition in the changing historical setting.

Phase 1 in the 1990s: Foundations

Knight's definition emerged and became prominent in the decade after 1994. It was a time of rapid change, initiatives and excitement in cross-border higher education, amid a ferment of discussion about integration and convergence at the world level, 'globalization' (see Chapter 7). Such times trigger the need for new explanations and new codes of conduct. Knight (1994) was among the many discursive innovations that emerged.

Various and conflicting perspectives, interests and strategies were in play. International organizations and national policy makers situated education in a global knowledge economy and saw trade in educational services as a source of both capacity building and capital accumulation (e.g. OECD, 2004; Bashir, 2007). Many university leaders saw opportunities to expand their reach, status and income in the more global setting. At least four groups of scholars emerged in educational studies. Terminology became a battleground.

One group of scholars offered advice for nations or universities seeking global competitiveness (e.g. Mazzarol and Soutar, 2002 on 'push-pull' in student mobility). A second group, drawing on Appadurai (1996), Castells (2000), Beck (2000) and others, saw positive potentials of the global in electronic networking, cross-border civil society, cosmopolitan learning, new hybridities, and mobility

beyond borders, though they critiqued the Anglo-American rush to educational markets (e.g. van der Wende, 2002; Valimaa, 2004). A third group saw the undermining of national public good and state sector education by global capital. They developed a polemical good/evil binary in which ‘internationalization’ was normed as ideal democratic education and ‘globalization’ referred to global capitalism writ large; for example in Welch (2002): ‘The current worldwide tide of globomania threatens to engulf moves towards genuine internationalization of universities’ (p. 471).

A fourth group saw all elements in play: national and global, economic and cultural, positive and negative (e.g. Henry et al., 1999; Marginson and Rhoades, 2002; Dale, 2005; Robertson, 2005). Global relations had growing potency, triggering selective transformations in state forms (Sassen, 1996; Robertson et al., 2002). However, while units within nations such as universities were becoming tuned to and partly turned to the global, the nation-state retained significant weight. It continued to structure and fund higher education.

Knight (1999; 2004a) aligned with a milder version of the third argument, the good/evil binary between internationalization and globalization. As an education-centred opposition to globally propagated neoliberalism and capitalist political economy, this mobilized support among many in university schools of education around the world who were critical of neoliberal economic policies and educational marketization. However, it trapped the critique of cross-border capitalism in the ‘national container’ (Shahjahan and Kezar, 2013). If the national container had once sustained Keynesian economic management and economic redistribution, the welfare state and education for all, it was now also the policy incubator of governmental neoliberalism – and neoliberal governments positioned higher education in a global knowledge economy.

Knight’s definition began in 1993 and 1994 with papers for practitioners of cross-border higher education in Canada. Knight was associated with both governmental coordination of international education, and institution-based practices. She saw definition as a means of constructing a common field, ‘a conceptual model that provides some clarity on meaning and principles to guide policy and practice’ (Knight, 2004a, p. 6). She noted a ‘sense of confusion of why internationalization is important’ and ‘a weakened sense of legitimacy and impact’ (Knight, 1997, p. 39). ‘Clarity’ was essential to organizing internationalization, and to self-reflection about it. ‘Internationalization must have parameters if it is to be assessed’ (Knight, 1994, p. 3).

In the Canadian Bureau of International Education’s *International Education Magazine* in 1993, Knight defined ‘internationalization’ as ‘the process of

integrating the international dimension into the teaching, research and service functions of an institution of higher education' (Knight, 1994, p. 3). In the 1994 *CBIE Research* bulletin she stated that 'an international dimension means a perspective, activity or service which introduces or integrates an international/intercultural/global outlook into the major functions of an institution of higher education' (p. 3) – not just activity, but mentality: 'perspective' and 'outlook'. Knight listed many places in an institution where an 'international outlook' could be integrated, and discussed in detail rationales and motivations, elements of cross-border activity, academic and organizational factors, 'checkpoints for an internationalization strategy' with 63 dot points, and a diagrammatic 'internationalization cycle'. The next year her book with the University of Amsterdam's Hans de Wit was less prescriptive but opened a global conversation (Knight and de Wit, 1995), carried by the emerging Internet.

Knight's definition became amplified by a broad-based network of expert practitioners in international offices of universities such as de Wit, industry associations servicing cross-border programmes, and consultants and governmental advisers and officials, initially in the Anglosphere and Western Europe. Over time shared tacit assumptions and judgements became apparent. Many proponents of Knight's definition advanced cross-border education on the basis of liberal internationalism, the post-First World War Wilson doctrine that also influenced the 1945 United Nations (Dagen et al., 2019, p. 646). According to Brandenburg and de Wit (2011), 'the higher education community still strongly believes that by definition internationalization leads to peace and mutual understanding, the driving forces behind programmes like Fulbright in the 1950s' (p. 15). However, while liberal internationalism was (and is) couched in universal terms, it was historically and culturally 'provincial' in Chakrabarty's (2007) sense. Like Wilson in 1919, Fulbright in the 1950s saw a Euro-American-centric world. Liberal internationalism has often been a carrier of neocolonial agendas.

In the early stages, Knight (1994) was little concerned about economic globalization. Commercialization was largely confined to 'business schools' in Canada (p. 5). However, Knight (1999) registered a shift. Institutions were expected 'to be more entrepreneurial ... and think medium to long-term in their approach to the international market' (p. 2). At first Knight was agnostic about this. 'There can be a direct and beneficial relationship between an international market orientation and the internationalization of the primary functions of a university/ college or institute'. But 'this is not always the case'. The key was to achieve 'balance between income generation motives and academic ones' (p. 8).

The 1999 paper developed Knight's take on globalization and internationalization. She began with the neutral geographical distinction. First, 'in a literal sense, international education can be interpreted to mean "a kind or process of education which involves, relates to or is carried on between two or more nations" (Knight, 1999, p. 10). Second, the literal meaning of 'global' is "worldwide" or "relating to the earth or world as a whole", calling up 'connectedness, interdependence' (p. 13), including global flows of 'technology, economy, knowledge, people, ideas' (p. 14). 'The central feature that distinguishes global from international ... is the concept of nation' (p. 13). Up to this point Knight's distinction between the adjectives 'international' and 'global' was non-ideological and was broadly shared in the higher education studies (e.g. Scott, 1998; Marginson and Rhoades, 2002). However, Knight (1999) used the nouns, the 'ization' words, differently from the adjectives. The literal approach to internationalization, meaning between nations 'results in a rather restricted approach to the concept', she stated (1999, p. 10). Internationalization and globalization differed in 'the implied purpose and impact' of each term (p. 13). Here Knight invoked the good/evil binary of internationalization and globalization. Globalization became seen as primarily economic globalization, an external threat to higher education. Internationalization was 'a response to or result of increased globalization' from outside (p. 14). It could be controlled by educators within a national framework and was always potentially virtuous.

Knight avoided a wholly negative view of global space and globalization but linked them to the suppression of national differences, cultural homogenization, a 'neo-colonist approach' (Knight, 1999, p. 15) and 'commercialization' (p. 9). The binary implied that internationalization, her master concept for unifying practitioners in virtue, was innocent of such effects. Yet early in the same text, Knight had acknowledged that outside 'the Western world ... internationalization is seen as a form of westernization or even neo-colonization' (p. 1). This ought to have rung alarm bells but she did not take the point further.

Phase 2 in the 2000s: The knowledge economy

By the early 2000s the idea of the global knowledge economy (Olssen and Peters, 2005) was widely installed in policy on cross-border education in the Anglosphere and the multilateral agencies using Knight's definition. Learning and knowledge were imagined as direct sources of economic value via human capital and research-based innovation. The discursive joins between economic

globalization, neoliberal policy and educational marketization were tightened. In the mid-2000s global university rankings entrenched what van der Wende (2001) described as a paradigmatic shift from cooperation to competition.

The World Trade Organization's General Agreement of Trade in Services (WTO GATS) pressed for the deregulation of cross-border trade in education (OECD, 2004) despite pushback from some in international education (Altbach, 2001). Many saw globalization and internationalization as synonymous (Teichler, 2004, p. 23), so that Knight's definition was seen to combine liberal internationalism with global trade and global rankings. After all, commercial international education was 'integrating an international, intercultural or global aspect' into post-secondary education. It was also clear that nation-states positioning themselves as competitors in the global knowledge economy could not be relied on to protect institutional autonomy from the global, or guarantee social and cultural values in education. This created a dilemma for Knight. Her concept of an internationalization that was universally inclusive *and* separated from global activity *and* universally virtuous did not fit with reality. Yet the definition had become very popular and its creator did not abandon it.

Though Knight's papers in 2003 and 2004 were said to 'update' and 'remodel' the definition its core was untouched. Instead she used auxiliary wording and arguments to try to steer policy and practice. First, the definition was extended beyond institutions to 'internationalization at the national, sector and institutional levels'. Second, it was made more abstract, universal and inclusive. Rather than 'teaching, research and service functions' it now referred to 'the purpose, functions or delivery' (Knight, 2004a, pp. 11–2). Yet Knight continued to write off the downsides of cross-border higher education as 'globalization', protecting the ideal of virtuous internationalization. She expanded on the internationalization/globalization binary. The two terms were 'purposely used differently' in education (Knight, 2005, p. 5). Internationalization was the site of 'ongoing and continuous effort' (Knight, 2003, p. 2). Globalization entailed 'challenges, and risks' (p. 3), and was to be avoided.

The discussion does not centre on the globalization of education. Rather, globalization is presented as a process impacting internationalization ... In fact, substantial efforts have been made during this past decade to maintain the focus on the internationalization of education and to avoid using the term globalization of education. (Knight, 2003, p. 3)

In a much-cited passage, Knight (2003) developed her distinctive linear scalar order of cross-border education. 'Globalization is changing the world

of internationalization', while 'internationalization is changing the world of education' (p. 3). Again, global economic forces impacted national higher education from outside, with effects mediated by the national container and by the inter-national agency of people and institutions in higher education. In her model people and institutions did not (or should not) exercise global agency outside the national container. The 'global' element in geography was both screened out as large, external and invasive; and also tucked away as a subset of internationalization, alongside 'intercultural'. Leaders and staff in higher education who implemented internationalization activity were positioned in the attractive role of cosmopolitan internal reformers of their institutions. Knight's idea required a gymnastic spatial logic but was oddly comforting.

Switching from norm to reality, Knight (2004a) acknowledged that not all cross-border activity was virtuous in fact. She critiqued the 'increasing emphasis on competition at the international level' and 'a not-so-subtle shift towards developing an international reputation' to boost competitive position (p. 21); oddly, because her remodelled definition had brought more such activity under the definition. She questioned institutional 'branding' (p. 21) and university ranking. Knight (2004b) was still more critical. At times she seemed to conflate World-Class University (WCU) building with commercialization, triggering a later defence by Huang (2007) of WCU strategies of catch-up in non-Western countries (pp. 58–9). For Knight it was all antithetical to her preferred internationalization. Yet she did not explicitly proscribe the cross-border activities she disliked, which would have jettisoned the definition's claim to universal coverage of the field. There was 'no right approach' (Knight, 2004a, p. 18). Rather she called for self-reflection and discussion of policies, strategies, programmes and activities (p. 19), and ongoing review of academic, social, cultural, political and economic rationales.

Altbach and Knight (2007) focused on unequal global power, a recurring theme for Altbach (e.g. 1977). 'Global capital' had 'heavily invested in knowledge industries worldwide' (p. 290). The globalizing of knowledge, mobility patterns and policy transfer from North to South compounded pre-existing global inequalities. 'The North largely controls the process'. 'We are at a crossroads – today's emerging programmes and practices must ensure that international higher education benefits the public and not simply be a profit centre' (p. 304). But if the path to public good was internationalization that path was part of the problem. Could the global North/West both lead internationalization and reduce its own dominance?

Phase 3 in the 2010s: Growing disillusionment

By the 2010s internationalization had 'evolved from a marginal and ad hoc range of activities to more comprehensive and central processes and policies' (de Wit, 2024). The International Association of Universities (IAU) found in 2018 that over 90 per cent of institutions mentioned 'internationalization' in the mission or strategic plan, though only a third in North America (Marinoni, 2019; de Wit and Altbach, 2021). Institutions used the Knight definition freely without taking on the self-examination that Knight mandated, often pursuing contradictory practices. Stein (2021) later remarked on universities that critiqued the Western homogenization of knowledge, and claimed respect for other cultures, while unabashedly generating profit from international students on the basis of the assumed superiority of Western education inherited from the colonial era (p. 1774).

It was all compatible with the Knight definition and that was the problem. Knight (2011) repeated her earlier concerns. Internationalization had become 'a catchall phrase ... losing its meaning and direction' (p. 14), and 'competitiveness, rankings, and commercialisation seem to be the driving forces' (p. 15). The number of foreign students, or agreements, or marketing, branding, reputation building or international accreditation, should not be equated with internationalization. Quantitative indicators met accountability requirements but missed the 'intangible' human essence (p. 15): Knight no longer sought to steer the process with 'checkpoints' as in 1994. She still wanted to normalize internationalization without being overtly prescriptive. She still saw the problem as being a reality that failed to conform to her definition, rather than being a definition unable to norm reality.

Some of Knight's colleagues responded differently. Like Knight they were concerned about the marketized realities of cross-border education but they also saw problems in the definition itself. 'Internationalization is suffering from an identity or mid-life crisis', stated de Wit (2011). Noting 'the changing global landscape and the related debate about internationalization as a "Western concept" or as a repetition of the old system by new players', he wanted to reappraise relations between the international, intercultural and global. In 'The end of internationalization', Brandenburg and de Wit (2011) took this further. They questioned the ideological binary. 'Internationalization has become the white knight of higher education, the moral ground that needs to be defended, and the epitome of justice and equity' while 'globalization is loaded with negative connotations' (p. 15). 'This constructed antagonism between internationalization

and globalization' ignores the fact that economic globalization is 'increasingly executed under the flag of internationalization'. 'We have to move away from dogmatic and idealist concepts' (p. 16). 'The future of higher education is a global one' and 'it is our job' to prepare it. 'Possibly we must even leave the old concepts of internationalization and globalization and move on to a fresh unbiased paradigm' (p. 17). It was the high point of self-critical thinking in the Knight camp. But there was no decisive break with the strategy of using a Western definition to shape worldwide practice.

In the end, the internal dissent and alternatives took the form of additional adjectives or extra phrases designed to paper over the cracks in the original definition, while leaving the core wording and the hegemonic project itself intact, for example 'comprehensive internationalization', 'intelligent internationalization', 'conscientious internationalization', 'responsible internationalization', and 'humanistic internationalization' (de Wit, 2024). In a report for the European Parliament de Wit and colleagues (2015) suggested not 'a fresh unbiased paradigm' but an embellished old paradigm. They defined internationalization as:

The intentional process of integrating an international, intercultural or global dimension into the purpose, functions and delivery of post-secondary education, in order to enhance the quality of education and research for all students and staff, and to make a meaningful contribution to society.
(de Wit et al., 2015, p. 29)

The authors wanted to broaden the agenda beyond revenue generation and research university competition, to foster internationalization at home, and to implement the UN Sustainable Development Goals (Brandenburg et al., 2019). 'There are tensions between a short term neoliberal approach to internationalization, focusing primarily on mobility and research, and a long term comprehensive quality approach, global learning for all' (de Wit, 2019, p. 15). However, the revised definition added further ambiguity ('quality', 'meaningful contribution'), while still admitting most kinds of cross-border practice – and Knight (2004a; 2005) continued to be quoted rather than the definition of de Wit et al (2015). But perhaps revising the original definition was no longer an option. Knight and colleagues were no longer steering concept or practice. The definition had become a fixed doctrine with its own symbolic power. To open the way to something better, Knight and colleagues would have had to disavow their earlier work. That was a bridge too far.

Stein (2021) reflects on the repeated promises to 'reconceptualize' and the 'end of internationalization' argument. She notes 'the intellectual and affective

difficulties of “imagining otherwise”, and a ‘lack of stamina for addressing uncertainty and complexity, and perceived entitlements to autonomy, cohesion and control’ (p. 1772).

In some ways concerns about the ‘decline’ of internationalization appears to be a thinly veiled concern about a potential declining advantage and dominance of Western higher education. In particular, there is decreasing certainty that there will be a perpetual pool of international students willing to pay exorbitant prices for study in Western institutions. (Stein, 2021, pp. 1775–6)

‘Euro-centred nostalgia’ about the pre-commercial era in cross-border education makes it ‘easier to uncritically frame the perceived risk of “decline” in the West as collective, universally-experienced loss’ (Stein, 2021, p. 1776). Critics of commercialism advocate internationalization for ‘the global public good’. But ‘who gets to determine what constitutes the global public good?’ (p. 1778). Stein calls for an ‘internationalization that might prepare us to surrender our learned sense of superiority and separation, and affirms our radical interdependence and responsibility to each other and the earth itself’ (p. 1779).

Limitations of the definition

Four problems with Knight’s definition and associated discourse are apparent. It is normative without being explanatory; it is grounded in a reductionist geography that closes global space, its claim to universalism legitimates any and every cross-border activity, and it reinforces global hierarchy in higher education in the form of Western centrism.

Normative without being explanatory

The Knight definition is not only teleological (purpose driven), the purpose of shaping practice crowds out the scholarly mission to understand and explain. In phase 1 Knight (1994) positioned the definition as conceptual in character but practical in intent. ‘It is important to note that it is written from a professional practitioner’s perspective not a theoretician’s’ (Knight, 1999, p. 1). This is rhetorically powerful as justification for a purpose-driven definition. Who can argue against a concern with practice? Nevertheless, the definition stands or falls on its intellectual coherence. Ideas about cross-border education should be all of conceptually robust, insightful of empirical realities and applicable in practice,

thereby useful to both practitioners and scholars. Knight's definition does not tick all these boxes. This is because it is not a realist theorization, it is normative exhortation to an ideal and 'outlook' (Knight, 1994, p. 3). Knight's definition is a closed concept rather than an open theory and as such has limited capacity to grasp changes in cross-border education.

Friedman (2017) locates Knight's internationalization in an older 'advocacy tradition' in US cross-border education (pp. 10–1). There are 'limitations to this approach for the social scientific study of higher education'. It is 'hard to separate analysis from advocacy'. While the 'best practices' serve 'to orient a community of practice that believes in this cause', Knight's best practices are based on an ideal not empirically grounded realities (p. 12).

Methodological nationalism

Knight wants to derisk the open global ontology by shutting it down. Internationalization, a practice that grows out of the familiar terrain of the national, is safe and good while globalization is inherently dangerous. Knight vainly hopes that national government will shape cross-border education according to her preferred formulas, while consenting to her ambitious blockage of global space. She has never jettisoned this strangely lobotomized geography, and it has been explicitly endorsed in part or whole by many other scholars at different times (e.g. van Vught et al., 2002; Currie et al., 2003; Chan, 2004; Warwick, 2014; Scott, 2017).

However, by attempting to deny by externalization the global scale, Knight hides from view the roles of both nation-states and individual universities in constituting global relations. Evading 'the challenge of space as a multiplicity' discourages the building of positive and productive global relations in higher education (Massey, 2005, p. 61). Negative referencing of the global also denies the potential of open global practices to de-centre inherited colonial relations, as outlined by Hall and others (pp. 62–3). The new global relations that emerged after 1990 were not just capitalist, economic and competitive: they were also communicative, cultural and collaborative, opening the possibility of democratic forms of global convergence. Knight's geography excludes global science (Chapter 9) and obscures collaborative higher education activity in the pan-national regional scale (Robertson et al., 2016; Robertson, 2018). Most importantly, it 'precludes a planetary consciousness, as we are stuck in global discourses underpinned by nation-state categories and identities' (Shahjahan and Grimm, 2022, p. 10).

Knight's nation-bound internationalization locks practitioners into the very neoliberal policies on competition in the global knowledge economy, driven and mediated by national governments, that she works strenuously to avoid (Knight, 2004a). Beck (2012) states that if globalization and internationalization are opposed, and only internationalization can secure the identity of agents, then how is it Knight's internationalization has in fact gone 'the way of economic globalization?' Given this, where then 'can agency be found?' (p. 138).

Nevertheless, Knight's geography has been widely taken up because it resonates with commonly held perceptions of how the world works. Methodological nationalism has a strong hold. Many find it hard to grasp global activity outside the nation-state; and on a methodologically nationalist terrain, Knight's definition seems to empower local higher education agents while offering them a response to globalization. You can take control, it says. Together with your national government, a useful ally, you can pursue your own chosen cross-border activities while protecting higher education. You can block and divert global economic forces that do not have the interests of education at heart. Nation-boundedness is also pragmatic. Some of those who acknowledge that higher education has a multiple geography focus solely on the national scale because it governs policy and regulation; for example, Friedman's (2017) administrators of international programmes in the United States and the UK.

Case studies by Cantwell and Maldonado-Maldonado (2009) in the Middle East and Latin America confirm the common-sense potency of Knight's definition, and its adaptability to the status quo. In all four cases interviewees saw the global as external and transcendent, with local agents compelled to respond to it (p. 303), and with the potential responses defined by national government policies as in Knight's geography. The authors conclude that while the Knight definition is 'theoretically unsatisfying', the definition is itself 'part of a technology of governance ... under this conceptualisation, globalization is seen as monolithic and unproblematic and the range of potential reactive positions is predetermined' (p. 304). This explains how despite Knight's stated concerns about commercialization and rankings her spatial reasoning has guided many higher education practitioners down that path.

Claim to be universal

Having in phase 1 opened Pandora's box by using a universal definition, in phases 2 and 3 Knight and her colleagues try to close the lid again by tinkering with the definition or piling interpretations on it. Yet the problem lies in the

project itself: the imposition of a universal definition on a heterogeneous reality and diverse interests; and the hubristic assumptions that the definition's creators could secure compliance with one particular interpretation of the definition, and that this particular interpretation must be best for education everywhere.

Curiously, Knight acknowledges the obstacles to a universalizing definition and then creates such a definition anyway. Higher education has many countries, systems and contexts, she says (Knight, 2003, p. 2). Stakeholders have diverse purposes, agendas and perspectives (Knight, 1999, p. 10). She is 'not developing a universal definition'. Yet it is important to ensure 'the meaning is appropriate for a broad range of contexts and countries in the world' (Knight, 2003, p. 2). More strongly, she states that 'it is important to have a common understanding of the term so that when we discuss and analyse the phenomenon [internationalization] we understand one another and also refer to the same phenomenon when advocating for increased attention and support' (Knight, 2004a, p. 9). It is a softened presentation of universalism, but it is universalism nevertheless.

Despite her attempt to close off the global Knight's definition is intended as universal to any and every cross-border educational activity. As with her spatial reasoning this winds up legitimating global rankings, international competition and cross-border commerce, all 'integrating an international, intercultural or global dimension into the purpose, functions or delivery of post-secondary education'. From time to time, Knight distances herself from the idea that any and every cross-border activity is desirable (e.g. Knight, 2013), yet the emotive appeal of her cause, internationalization, rests on its universalism. At the same time abstract universalism obscures real localities, interests, differences and fault lines in cross-border education, concealing relations of power. This reduces Knight's purchase on practice (Friedman, 2017, p. 14). It also arranges all countries on a single universal development curve with the West positioned in the lead. Instead of different societies facing each other at the same time, societies are seen as essentially the same but at different stages of historical development (Massey, 2005, p. 68). Again, the refusal of multiplicity decisively limits what is possible in higher education.

If Knight's definition was conceived as a universal in a democratic context, she would negotiate a priori agreement on the purposes of integrating an international, intercultural or global dimension in higher education. In practice such agreement is no more feasible than having one purpose or value of higher education itself, with its multiple missions and stakeholders. But no such negotiation is attempted. The claim to 'a common understanding of the

term' is an act of power. The most spectacular example is the imposition of would-be universal Western internationalization in non-Western countries, as is now discussed.

Geopolitics of the definition: Western-centrism

As this suggests, the singular universal form of Knight's definition begs the question of its cultural content and political meanings. Liberal internationalism assumes that one set of Euro-American values and practices can be applied everywhere. This would-be universal is itself provincial and particular. Beck and Grande (2010) critique ideas of global convergence based on 'a homogeneous and universal model of Western modernity' (p. 413). The problem here is not just global inequality but continuing history. Knight's internationalization follows almost 500 years of Euro-American domination. Eurocentrism is 'the most fundamental issue' in international higher education (Lo and Ng, 2013, p. 38; Yang, 2019, p. 65). Advocates of Knight's definition know the world is diverse and that coloniality matters, but nothing in the definition overturns its default Euro-American centrism. Though the old Western hegemony is fragmenting, Knight's definition has not evolved to incorporate political, cultural and knowledge plurality, because that would weaken its universal claim.

In a multipolarizing and decolonizing world this position has become increasingly difficult to sustain. 'It is a "will to closure" which must be prised open precisely to enable a way out from present-day Eurocentrism' (Massey, 2005, p. 121).

The Anglosphere, France, the Netherlands, Belgium and Russia between them educate the majority of incoming cross-border students. As noted, these former colonizing nations maintain patterns of brain drain and epistemic exclusion inherited from military colonialism and the neo-imperial US domination after the Second World War. Neocolonial relations in education are sustained by inherited institutional power, global English and the compelling attractions of Whiteness to cross-border students (Shahjahan and Edwards, 2022). Relations between Euro-American higher education and the rest 'continue to be predicated on the Western belief that it is morally superior and that it is its right to act on such a basis' (Yang, 2019, p. 66). One test is the English-language curriculum. In the thirty years since Knight (1994) its contents have been scarcely touched by non-Western knowledge. Programmes for global citizenship and competences mostly (not always) equip Euro-Americans to operate freely across the world, in continuity with colonial

Orientalism (Said, 2003). Capacity-building projects in emerging countries often perpetuate dependence on the West. All of this calls for a wrenching self-appraisal in the former colonizing countries as Stein (2021) notes. Nothing in Knight's definition triggers this all-important process of self-appraisal.

What Knight (1999) calls 'neo-colonization' is not a pathology of globalization separate from and opposed to internationalization. It has long been part of inter-national dealings and will remain so until the relational structure of internationalization changes. Not only does Knight's definition fail to challenge 'neo-colonization', the definition perpetuates it. The core problem is that the definition is self-centred and non-relational in form. It focuses on the nature and practices of the self (or the home institution, or country) while ignoring the consequences for others. To repeat, the definition sees internationalization as 'integrating an international, intercultural, or global dimension into the purpose, functions or delivery of post-secondary education'. Changing one's own education is the end in itself, not mutual outcomes. Knight's formula sees the institution as 'a point where activity begins and ends' (Beck, 2012, p. 142) rather than as part of a constellation of connections and effects.

This not only encourages agents to be self-referencing without being other-referencing, it negates responsibility to the combined welfare and accountability to the other. When Knight-defined internationalization is pursued by Euro-American institutions and systems, Euro-American centrism is structured into its very core. The framing is narcissistic and negates the very idea of *inter-national* relations. The other side of the Western claim to universalism is the autarkic Western individualism, self-centredness and self-regard.

While the definition is non-relational in form its relational effects are profoundly felt. The sharpest criticism is from non-Western countries where Western internationalization negates local agency. From the global East, Yang (2014) states that in 'non-Western societies ... a so-called "international" perspective has been imposed from the outset' (p. 153).

What is lacking is an appropriate combination of the 'international' and the local. Within the contemporary context of Western dominance, internationalization of higher education in non-Western societies necessarily touches on longstanding knotty issues and tensions between Westernization and indigenization. This is particularly true in China, a country with a continuous history of fostering unique cultural heritages for thousands of years. (Yang, 2014, p. 153)

From the global South, Ogachi (2009) states that global hierarchy, competition for talent, and exploitative commercial providers 'deconstruct the notion of an altruistic internationalization of higher education'. Internationalization deepens 'the relation of dependency of local higher education institutions on higher education institutions in industrialised countries' (p. 333). Teferra (2019a) takes issue with the 'intentional' internationalization in the rebadged definition of De Wit et al. (2015). Internationalization in Africa 'is far from being an intentional process'. There universities engage in 'massive consumption' of ideas, knowledge and textbooks from the global North 'while staunchly, but helplessly, adhering to international academic and scholastic norms and values'. Global rankings push 'the internationalization pendulum from intention to coercion', pressuring institutions 'to do things not necessarily within the realm of burning institutional needs'. Teferra (2019b) sees the 'benevolent intentionality in internationalization' as 'a continuation of the neocolonial project'. He wants 'a more neutral, robust, "intention free" and inclusive definition'. Definitions should be realistic, focusing 'on the essence of the phenomenon'.

A preferred approach

Explanation not ambiguity

Knight's goal of both explaining and unifying the higher education world on the basis of a single idea of cross-border education should be abandoned. Further, scholarly explanation should be distinguished from the normative shaping of practice. Concepts can inform practice but the same concepts can be attached to many different agendas, as the history of Knight's definition shows. This diversity should be expected and respected, and differences should be openly discussed. Concepts cannot be both rendered sufficiently ambiguous so as to nominally cover all practice while being at the same time theoretically coherent.

Knight's definition cannot explain the global higher education landscape because its normative character and ambiguous universalism tend to conceal not reveal global relations of power, and because it lacks a critical edge. Better explanations would unpick cross-border higher education with maximum inclusion and clarity, enabling full and free identification of similarities, differences and ethical positions so as to inform practice. Explanations should not seek to close spatial realities and possibilities.

Cross-border geography

As Chapter 7 argued, all kinds of space, whether global, national or local, are continually constructed by human agents. Global activities are not transcendent or external to higher education. Higher education is both subject and object of globalization (Scott, 1998), actor and reactor in relation to it (Beerkens, 2004). Many kinds of global and international action are possible. There is nothing necessary about the knowledge economy imaginary (Rizvi and Lingard, 2009, p. 90; Rizvi et al., 2022): the problem is not its globality but its grounding in the ecologically/socially destructive project of global capital accumulation. De Sousa Santos (2007) suggests 'an alternative, counter-hegemonic globalization' based on epistemic heterogeneity, including indigenous knowledge, and 'the university as public good' (p. 78).

The double geography of cross-border education, with both national-international relations and global relations, sustains two kinds of practice. International relations are shaped within national policy and regulation and the multilateral inter-state order (e.g. the regulation of student visas). In global relations institutions, people and ideas move across borders with less national intervention (e.g. research, online programmes). Institutions and persons pursue a mix of international and global practices. State agencies pursue inter-governmental activity yet participate in global systems like science. In international action, people and institutions draw on resources from government while operating within its framework. In global activities they have less state support but more freedom to act.

The two sets of relations feed each other (Marginson, 2022d). Global convergence creates conditions for intensified internationalization. The reverse is also true: repeated international connections foster global integration (Conrad, 2016) and can even lead to partial 'de-nationalization' in education (Teichler, 2004, p. 23). The multiple scalar geography of higher education is instinctively grasped by institutional leaders, scientists and mobile students. Mapping cross-border practices using a rigid framework that correlates norms to scales, as in Knight's definition, undermines that understanding and practice of multiple scales.

New approach to terminology

Once the ideological baggage has been dropped, higher education studies can develop disinterested terminology, as in other disciplines (e.g. the approach

Table 10.1 Preferred approach to definitions derived from 'international' and 'global'

Term	Definition
International	Phenomena, processes or relations between nations (international) or between organizations or persons in nations
Internationalization	Creation or growth of relations between nations, or between organizations or persons in nations
Global	Phenomena, processes or relations pertaining to the world as a whole, or a large part of the world
Globalization	Any extension or intensification of relations on the world or planetary scale, leading to convergence and/or integration (note that there are multiple processes, plural globalizations)

Source: Author.

to scale in geography). In Table 10.1 the nouns 'internationalization' and 'globalization' are neutral. Specific modes of cross-border activity, involving differing interests and values, are indicated by attached adjectives. This protects the analytical rigour of the geo-spatial terms while clarifying the normative choices. For example, 'neoliberal globalization' refers to policies and actions that further economic markets, capital accumulation and business models. 'Neocolonial internationalization' refers to inter-national relations with asymmetric agency, coercion or dependence, in continuity with colonialism. 'Communicative globalization' refers to worldwide convergence and/or integration via the extension and intensification of networked messaging and data transfer. 'Reciprocal internationalization' indicates inter-national relations regulated by just exchange, equal respect, and mutual influence.

Such concepts can focus on decolonization. Scholarly work and professional practice move forward by stepping away from the Western hegemonic project and facilitating diversity of models and languages, the interdependence of agents, mutual learning and equality of respect. Concepts should facilitate the observation and analysis of relationality, including inequality, domination/subordination and inclusion/exclusion (see Chapter 11).

Conclusions

The Knight definition project sets out to unify research and practice in cross-border higher education on the basis of hegemonic concepts and their preferred interpretation. Knight attempts a partial closure of global space by asserting a

pre-1990 methodological nationalism in higher education, grounded in a liberal educational sensibility that opposes economic liberalism in higher education. Unfortunately, the enemy of an enemy is not always a friend. Knight's ambiguities reflect the ambiguities of liberalism itself in capitalist societies.

Knight's strategy gained much of its initial power in education circles from its appeal to critics of capitalist globalization and neoliberalism, together with nostalgia for the more nation-bound era of Keynesian economic management of the public good. Yet the Knight definition has been unabashedly annexed as a tool of competitive university promotion and marketization while joining institutions to national policies on the knowledge economy. It also implements the neocolonial strategies of Western countries in global higher education. It would have been better to assert a radically different approach to global relations that both broke with colonialism and maximized the global space beyond nation-states.

It has proven impossible to shape an open and plural reality to the normative and universalizing Knight definition, while a definition restricted by abstract universalism, a disabling geography and Euro-American centrism cannot explain that same reality. Knight's definition has survived by being annexed to power and by becoming ever more ambiguous, belying its original stated purpose as a tool of clarification (which was a worthy goal, as essential for professional reflexivity as it is for rigorous scholarship). The flexible application of the definition in diverse contexts, with its many permutations, in which the essential form survives, recall the comment of Shahjahan and Edwards (2022) about the 'malleability' of hegemony in global higher education, 'its ability to shape-shift in response to its present environment to (re)construct its past and future' (p. 2). The universal definition project built great support. However, after a thirty-year trial its defects are clear. It must be abandoned.

* * * * *

It is essential to start again, with an approach to cross-border relations in higher education that is less ambitious than Knight and her colleagues, and more ambitious.

Less ambitious, in that the unrealistic neocolonial conceit of uniting all cross-border practices under a Western sky is abandoned. More ambitious, in combining the inter-national scale with the global scale and being more coherent, explanatory, and illuminating of reciprocity. As the hegemony of Knight's definition starts to fade, more voices and ideas can emerge to shape thought and practice. The final Chapter 11 continues the discussion about what might be possible in global higher education.

Conclusion: Towards Global Common Good in Higher Education

*But what I would like to stress in conclusion is this: there is no establishment of the truth without an essential position of otherness; the truth is never the same; there can be truth only in the form of the other world and the other life (*l'autre monde et al vie autre*).¹*

~ Michel Foucault (2011), *The Courage of Truth: Lecture at the College de France 1983–1984*, Palgrave-Macmillan, Hounds-mills, p. 340

The preface of this book began with Heraclitus (544–484 BCE). Social space is always becoming, always being made, always unfinished: ‘All things are in flux, like a river ... Everything flows’. The future is unknown: ‘Whoever cannot seek the unforeseen, sees nothing. The known way is an impasse’. As Massey (2005) puts it: ‘Non-knowledge (as the undecidable, as uncertainty, as indeterminacy) is structurally inescapable’ (p. 59). The openness and unknowingness of the future is not a problem. The contrary is the case: it is a source of hope. We are not forever confined. The actual and possible are both part of the real and at any given time the possible is richer than the actual (for more discussion see Massey, 2005, pp. 33, 39, 55, 95).

In contrast with the other chapters of *Higher education in times of upheaval* this final chapter, focused on global common good, is concerned more with the possible than the actual. Global relations in general and in higher education are underdeveloped. Going forward there are forks in the road. Nevertheless, global relations in higher education can evolve constructively and help to take societies forward. New social practices begin where imagining, necessity

¹ The final sentence in the notes for Foucault’s final lecture in the 1983–84 series, on 28 March 1984, three months before his death. This was his last word in the lectures at the College de France, where he advanced the new ideas not yet written into books, though on the day he ran out of time or energy before the last paragraphs could be delivered (Foucault, 2011, pp. 338–40).

and contingency meet. And as Foucault states, the primary source of new imaginings and practices is engagement with otherness. '*The truth is never the same*'. Sameness is the test of truth that has been dominant in the West, but the truth is found in difference.

* * * * *

Introduction: Bringing forward global common good

Chapter 1 stated that despite the great expansion and diversification of higher education it presently faces five problems, especially in the Anglosphere. These problems have been addressed throughout *Global higher education in times of upheaval*:

1. *The blockage of collective goods in an individualized neoliberal framework.* After Part I explored the one-sided emphasis on private pecuniary goods and the attenuated provision of public good, Chapter 6 argued for a renewed focus on higher education for the common good. This final chapter takes forward the idea of global common good, including the imagining and practice of the world as a single political subject.
2. *The distortion of cultural formation in an economic framework.* Chapters 4 and 5 show that learning immersed in knowledge is a cultural not economic process, and cannot substitute for on-the-job skills training. The way through is for higher education to be honest and realistic in public, to stop claiming a role the sector cannot fulfil, to actively support students and graduates, to build vocational partnerships and to facilitate the transition to work, and firmly defend the academic cultural core.
3. *The fact of the impossibility of social equality through education alone.* Chapter 5 found that educational institutions on their own cannot create equality (the main well-springs of social differentiation lie elsewhere), especially in marketized education systems. Again the way through is to be honest and realistic in public, to stop claiming a role the sector cannot fulfil, to keep all doors open and to advocate socio-economic and educational reforms that move in the direction of greater equality of condition.

4. *The imposed dilemma of choice between the national and the global.* Part II showed the higher education sector has a dual spatiality, national-local and global. It is challenging to maintain this, given that nativism and nation-centred geopolitics pose a choice that should never be a choice between national and global, but the dual spatiality is fundamental to the identity and autonomy of the sector. Research universities must maintain both their local contributions and their academic values while sustaining cross-border collaboration beyond the nation.
5. *The blockage of cultural multiplicity in a hegemonic framework.* Multiplicity has been partly suppressed from sight in post-1990 global higher education, but it is a tremendous asset for higher education and knowledge everywhere. The way to higher education as a common good is to build on the multipolar capacity of the sector, for example by creating a transformative multi-lingual global knowledge system.

Of these the first, collective good, is the keystone issue. When social interdependence is unlocked the other problems can be more effectively addressed. The starting premise of *Global higher education in times of upheaval* is the need to forward the contributions of higher education to social collectivity which include (not exclude zero-sum) the benefits for individuals. The book has ambitiously argued that (1) collaborative practices of common good in higher education, grounded in local-regional communities relating to other communities, should combine with (2) practice of global common good that foregrounds cultural and systemic diversity and the interdependency of the individual, society and nature.

Unlocking national collectivity

A principal insight of this book has been that in the Anglosphere, the present potential for collective practices in higher education differs according to scale.

Higher education institutions can freely pursue common good in the *local* scale, along with communities, local government, organizations and businesses, though because community building is primarily locally financed the scope is more limited in impoverished communities. Institutions, especially research universities, also develop cooperative common goods in the *global* scale. Research and scholarship move freely across national borders. Global partnerships contribute to academic learning and student self-formation,

augment institutions and their communities, and foster human agency through mobility. The global scale in higher education currently excludes most languages and knowledges, but the collective structure is there and global education and research can evolve towards multiplicity and inclusion.

However, in the *national* scale higher education tends to be constrained, especially in the Anglosphere. The market model and its rationales and logics are a particular stumbling block. In activities shaped by national policy, funding and regulation, neoliberal states limit the recognition and funding of collective outcomes. Aside from research, collective outcomes in higher education are redefined as individualized goods of employability and equity and are largely financed by institutions and students, not by the state as part of its public remit. Issues of systemic structural reform, social justice in participation and adequate student living support depend on national approaches for resolution but are either off the agenda or devolved downwards to institutions. Only social democratic systems outside the Anglosphere retain clear commitments to national collective good, treating higher education as a publicly funded public good and open output maximizer (as once was the case in the UK and Australia). Further, the national control exercised by some states limits the scope for local and global collective action.

In the UK and Australia the policy settings force universities to pursue a distorted commercial role in the global space so as to generate revenues for financing teaching and research that in other countries are basic to state support on the basis of higher education as a public good.

How then to move forward in the Anglo-American national scale? A principal conclusion of the book, as indicated, is that higher education as a *common good* is a more fruitful approach to the collective contributions of higher education than higher education as a public good. Common good is not a funding formula trapped by tax minimization politics, as is the case with economically defined public good. Discursively, the neoliberal public good has become decisively limited. It has acquired the Samuelson (1954) meaning of residual 'public goods', public contributions that are confined to instances of visible market failure. This cuts off the potential for expanding the social horizon to a larger possible: if a collective good has never been, the inability of markets to create that good is necessarily hidden. The common good approach breaks out of the straitjacket engineered by the Samuelson formula. It reopens the potentials for collective social transformation. Building local experience and agency can accumulate networks and resources that are brought to bear on national political culture.

Scope for institutional action

Higher education cannot wait for Anglo-American states to develop critical distance from the politics and logics of capital. This chapter proposes imaginings, values and social relations that when *practised directly* by higher education people and institutions would advance the common good. Institutions are embedded in states but also construct their own cross-border relations. All higher education has a partial, varying autonomy vis-à-vis states. The extent to which that autonomy can be converted to common good is a case-by-case matter. The limits need to be tested, and in doing so higher education can strengthen its social-political base.

There is scope for higher education institutions to systematize their cross-border collaboration so as to jointly provide 'free-use goods' (Mansbridge and Boot, 2022) that embody higher education and research as part of the global common good. One possible vehicle for such negotiations is the International Association of Universities (IAU, 2025). For example, universities could develop and implement agreed policies and protocols on:

- Shared commitment to the advocacy and defence of academic freedom, and of the autonomy of higher education institutions, in matters of education and research;
- Protection of cross-border research cooperation and opposition to the national securitization of research except in a few domains of strategic military importance;
- Protection of students, researchers, faculty and other higher education persons moving across national borders.

Systematic implementation would require many universities to develop a firmer backbone in their relations with their governments. Nevertheless, such policies and protocols could be at least partly achieved within prevailing relations of power.

Beyond sovereign individualism and sovereign nationalism

Nevertheless, there are limits to the extent that collective social relations can be built within high individualist societies. Higher education has a crucial role in shaping a change in values.

The limitations of sovereign individualism for national common good, as shown in Part I of this book, parallel the limitations of sovereign nationalism

for global common good shown in Part II. As Craig Calhoun (2005) puts it: 'the ideas of nation and individual grew up together in Western history and continue to inform each other. ... Nations are themselves treated as individuals – by ideologues of course, but also by diplomats, lawyers and comparative sociologists' (pp. 262–3).

Sovereign individualism, with its negation of social interdependence, and worsening economic and social inequalities, cannot constitute a complete social order. People need social relations, community in which they share, in which all are valued and there are known beliefs and familiar rituals with which to anchor their social selves. Neoliberal narratives of individual economic progress do not provide community. In much of the West the mono-cultural patriotism offered by nativist political populism has been slipped into the gap.

Amid multiple, changing and hybrid identities, one-dimensional patriotism is abstract and unreal, and readily slides into racism, but by dividing space into an us/them hierarchy it offers apparent community, identity, pride and self-security, while protecting national capital accumulation ('Make America Great Again'). Yet nativist populism leaves the well-springs of neoliberal inequality undisturbed, and in deploying bordered national sovereignty as identity, it decisively blocks the possibility of a global commons. Pouring out of the West on almost the same scale as post-1990 globalization, nation-bound Western politics has quickened similar thinking everywhere. Emphatic national sovereignty readily degenerates into inter-national conflict, the global anti-commons, as in hot wars (Russia/Ukraine) or cold wars (United States/China, United States/Iran, etc.). The imperatives to global unity, mutual respect and cooperation on common problems are paralysed by these bristling nationalisms.

In higher education and research both the United States/China decoupling and nativist resistance to migration show that patriotism and national security can quickly displace both neoliberal economic goals and also education and science as ends in themselves. With a second Trump regime in the United States, this process has not run its course. The darkest hour is before the dawn.

Sea-change. A sea-change in social agendas and practices is needed, a transformation that transcends the limits of sovereign individualism and sovereign nationalism and takes social relations beyond neoliberalism, populist nativism and self-aggrandizing geopolitics.

The question for higher education institutions, leaders and communities is how education, research and global space making can contribute to that sea-change. The tools available in education are contents and values in the curriculum and pedagogy (higher education as subjectification and

socialization), research inquiry and networks, and links and relations between higher education people and other social agents through direct inputs into local and regional communities and economies, NGOs and civil society, all levels of government, international organizations and networks. Helping this sea-change to happen is the largest contribution that higher education can make to the global common good.

Building global commonality. How can this be pursued beyond the national border? What is the scope for defining and achieving global common good on the basis of global justice, amid unequal relations of power and across the diversity of languages, cultures and knowledges? How are the global commonality and global diversity reconciled – how can higher education work effectively with the multiplicity of societies and cultures? *Global multiplicity is the crunch issue for global higher education.* ‘The truth is never the same’. Anglo-American hegemony has associated global higher education with a profound homogenization. Yet uniformity is not inevitable and may already be giving way to plurality. By building on the growing multipolarity of capacity, many new potentials can be opened up.

The remainder of the chapter discusses higher education’s potentials in building both social relations and global commonality. Two aspects are explored: (1) how higher education can foster the interdependencies of individual, society and nature; and (2) shaping global higher education space and the configuration of diversity/multiplicity in that space. As in Chapter 7, the primary methodological move is to imagine global space. Here the crucial step (and perhaps the main contribution of Part II) is to understand the world as not just a space of territories, coordinates and locations but as *a single political subject in its own right*. The world is a space of ever-changing difference, and also a single space with its own agency.

Interdependencies of self/society/nature

What are the elements of a sustainable global commons to guide practice in higher education? First, self-determining and self-forming individuals capable of social and ecological action on their own behalf, severally and in cooperation with others. Second, positive-sum relations between individuals and society in which individual freedoms and capabilities are nurtured, and also embedded in interdependent social relations in a collective social whole that is greater than the sum of the individual parts. Third, knowing the planetary dimension

(Chakrabarty, 2021), including relations between human society and nature. Higher education and institutionalized knowledge can contribute to all three.

Individual and social interdependence

Chapters 2 and 6 emphasized 'the inseparability of individuality and sociability' (Massey, 2005, p. 58), and the social-relational formation of individual subjectivity (Vygotsky, 1978). As Zhao puts it: 'social existence is a precondition of individual existence'. Yet the individual is not simply determined by the social so that they constitute an identity. The individual and social are ontologically distinct, separate aspects of a stratified reality as Archer (1995) states. The social space is constituted in open fashion in the interactions of all of the individual and institutional trajectories, each with potentiality as autonomous agents.

Outcomes in higher education can be understood as individualized, collective or both (individual/collective). As discussed in Chapter 2, *individual outcomes* include pecuniary benefits received by single persons, such as augmented salary resulting from graduation; and non-pecuniary benefits such as personal knowledge of biology, or augmented agency and confidence in all spheres of life. *Collective outcomes* include shared social benefits such as the contribution of Covid-19 vaccine research to public health. *Individual/collective outcomes* are effects for individual graduates that flow into collective social relations. Much vocational training has individual/collective outcomes. For example, the education of doctors and nurses generates individualized salary returns for those health professionals and also expands the capacity of public health. More generally, the non-pecuniary formation of graduates as critically minded self-determining agents, the subjectification function and also their socialization into social norms and relations such as their formation as politically capable and connected citizens, have many flow-ons to collective society.

Individuality. In discussing equality and freedom Lukes (1973) finds that 'the idea of human dignity or respect for persons lies at the heart of the idea of equality'. Respect for persons means understanding them as 'ends in themselves' (p. 125) and conferring this respect equally on all persons regardless of their characteristics. Lukes identifies 'autonomy, privacy and self-development' as 'the three faces of liberty or freedom' (p. 125). A person is free insofar as their actions are their own, not the object of another's will or the result of coercion or abstract forces, they are capable of self-development and shape their lives and actions

as a positive project, and there is a private part of the self where deliberation on purpose and will can occur (Lukes, 1973, pp. 125–34; Marginson, 2024b). Similarly, Sen (1985) identifies three facets of freedom: ‘control freedom’ or negative freedom in Berlin’s (1969) sense, which is freedom from external coercion; ‘effective freedom’ or positive freedom, freedom to do; and ‘agency freedom’, the seat of the deliberative will. As Lukes (1973) states, ‘a crucial element here is clearly that of consciousness and critical reflection’ (p. 128).

These aspects of freedom are interrelated. Without equality of respect a person’s freedom is endangered, autonomy reduced, privacy invaded and ‘self-development stunted’ (Lukes, 1973, p. 137). Conversely, without individual freedoms social equality is reduced: ‘A stratified educational system which reinforces other social inequalities and blocks the self-development of the less favoured constitutes a denial of respect to persons’ (Lukes, 1973, pp. 137, 134). A core contribution of higher education to the common good, perhaps the most important potential in student learning, is to foster, on the basis of equality of respect, agents who consciously and reflexively shape their own evolution in the process of *student self-formation* in relational social environments (Klemencic, 2023; Marginson, 2024a; 2024b; Lee, 2024).

Higher education as student self-formation is form of subjectification that emphasizes students’ conscious agency, reflexivity and will to learn, while immersing the self-forming person in disciplinary knowledge and social relational experiences (Marginson, 2024a). Here conscious reflexivity is key as Lukes (1973) notes. The implications for curricula and pedagogy are a larger discussion than can be pursued here. Case (2015) states that ‘we need to envision a university programme with a significantly enlarged space’ for self-forming student agency (p. 850). Further, as noted, self-formation is also preparation in social relations.

Social relationality. Massey (2005) refers to ‘a fuller recognition of the simultaneous coexistence of others with their own trajectories and their own stories to tell’ (p. 11). Zhao (2021) states that not all interests are reducible to individual interests grounded in self-referencing rationality. There is also a larger category of shared interest (p. 28). ‘If we want to resolve the difficulties of cooperation, we must ... enter into a field of “relational reasoning”, where the objective is ‘an intentional optimisation of the relational space between at least two persons with respect to the best possible forms of coexistence’ (p. 29). For Zhao relational reasoning and individual rationality are ‘not conceptually opposed’ and potentially are ‘mutually complementary’. This requires giving priority to shared knowledge, minimization of conflict and mutual harm, and

maximal cooperation, enhancing the interests of all (p. 29). 'One improves if-and-only-if all others improve' (p. xv). These principles can be scaled up to groups of any size.

The foregoing arguments suggest the need in higher education to find a halfway house between individual and social: neither sovereign individuals entirely self-referenced, nor individuals overshadowed by structure, vulnerable to coercion by the state or by market forces whether autonomous or embedded by the state. The objective is to establish subjectification, socialization and community outreach that foster robust self-forming individuals who understand interdependence and share responsibility for the common good.

Individual, society and nature

Questions of individual/society/nature dependency are slowly gaining greater traction in higher education systems, and advancing more rapidly in scholarship on higher education (e.g. of many Barnett, 2018; Facer, 2022; Stein, 2024). One dimension is the ecological impact of these often very large institutions and their research and communications infrastructures (McCowan, 2020), including air travel by students and faculty (Shields, 2019). Another is in knowledge. Higher education now plays a major role in cross-national and interdisciplinary programmes of research and policy advice focused on global climate change, oceanography, habitat loss and species extinction, food and water security, energy transition, related challenges in public health, social and educational responses to ecological transformation, and related issues (Witte, 2023). While the Trump administration's policy of closing down US climate research does great damage it can scarcely close down the worldwide field.

In the educational mission the society/nature interface is less developed. Teaching and learning that foster understanding of the interdependencies between humans and the biosphere scarcely needs advocacy, yet these programmes jostle for attention and resources alongside hundreds of others. Awareness of ecological relations and related questions of social organization is diffused broadly but unevenly. Environmental studies programmes are positioned alongside business education normed by maximum capital accumulation, and inescapably, resource acquisition and depletion. The redesign of whole universities to coherently embody individual/society/nature interdependency still has far to run.

Much rests on whether the global knowledge system can be opened up to endogenous (Indigenous) insights in an ‘ecology of knowledges’ (Santos, 2007; see below) given the ecological knowledge carried by many communities. Stein (2022) advocates a far-reaching transformative practice of global common good. Referring to the North American settler states in the United States and Canada, she asks: ‘What does the “public good” mean in the context of capitalist nation-states whose existence rests on stolen lands and lives (genocide), environmental degradation (ecocide), and repressed knowledge (epistemicide)?’ (pp. 269–70). Decolonization ‘may entail the end of higher education as we know it’ (p. 262).

It might also mean learning how to interrupt the colonial tendency to calculate, consume, and instrumentalise relationships for individual or institutional self-interest. This change would require activating a sense of accountability that is not contingent or self-serving, but rather is rooted in our interdependence on a shared finite planet. (Stein, 2022, p. 266)

‘The truth is never the same’ In bringing forward endogenous (Indigenous) understandings of human/nature interdependence, pathways for human survival open up. This creates multiple potentials for action in local communities. At the same time, a key step is to take the ecology imaginary forward by conceiving the world as a single political subject.

Building the global relational space

This section begins by reviewing ideas about global relations developed by United Nations agencies and then moves beyond those ideas, beyond the multilateral imagining.

UNDP global public good

At the end of the 1990s the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) shaped a global public good space with an ecological emphasis (Kaul et al., 1999). This is an economic framing of public goods stretched to fit the global scale. The UNDP argument (p. xxiii) begins from Samuelson (1954) and Hardin (1968). Global public goods are defined as follows:

Global public goods must meet two criteria. The first is that their benefits have strong qualities of publicness – that is, they are marked by nonrivalry in consumption and nonexcludability ... The second criterion is that their benefits

are quasi universal in terms of countries (covering more than one group of countries), people (accruing to several, preferably all, population groups), and generations (extending to both current and future generations, or at least meeting the needs of current generations without foreclosing development options for future generations). This property makes humanity as a whole the publicum, or beneficiary of global public goods. (Kaul et al., 1999)

The UNDP group moves beyond Samuelson's public goods in two respects. First, they emphasize broad distribution of public goods, tending towards universality between and within countries. Second, they fill the absence of a global state with international laws, state-to-state agreements and active political participation by non-state actors. Whether a good is public or private then becomes 'a question of political interest and capacity to place a specific good in the public and global domain' (Mazzucato, 2023, p. 7).

Kaul et al. themselves identify three constraints on the global public goods they imagine. First, 'the jurisdictional gap, that is, the discrepancy between a globalised world and national, separate units of policy-making'. Policy is 'national in both focus and scope' but many challenges are global (Kaul et al., 1999, p. xxvi). States at global level behave like private actors motivated by national self-interest. 'The risk of state failure is systemic due to the absence of a global sovereign' (p. 15). Global public goods face both market failure and state failure and in that resemble Ostrom's (1990; 2010) common-pool goods. As with Ostrom this lacuna highlights the role of non-state agents, but the UNDP's second constraint is that global agents in civil society and the corporate sector tend to be marginalized because international cooperation is largely handled by states. The third constraint is that incentives to cooperate internationally are weak, unless purchased via aid (Kaul et al., 1999, p. xxvi).

The UNDP enthusiasm for global cooperation conceals the fact that their public good framework, with action confined to market failure and no global agent, limits the options. Mazzucato (2023) emphasizes that UNDP global public goods are confined by Samuelson's nonrivalry and nonexcludability. As was stated in Chapter 6, 'systemic problems in global capitalism (e.g. climate change and inequality)' are treated 'as externalities and the results of failures of an otherwise perfect system, rather than questioning the structures' (p. 6).

UNESCO global common good

As noted in Chapter 6, Mazzucato (2023) moves to the common good idea, which does not assume the political primacy of the market. This enables

a broader range of state-led activity. She advocates collaborative global structures involving partnerships between the state, business and civil society, as Kaul et al. (1999) suggest, but with a larger mandate. 'This is not about enforcing top-down or centralised regulation, but about letting collective processes inform public policy and transnational governance' (Mazzucato, 2023, p. 13)

UNESCO (2015) titles its paper on education and common good *Rethinking education: Towards a global common good*, though the 'global' scale is under-developed in the paper. As noted in Chapter 6, the UNESCO emphasis on negotiated common good and synergy between conception, production and distribution is suited to the local-regional scale. Common good brings civil society organizations and corporations into non-pecuniary and collective social outcomes. The collectivity also fosters individualized goods. In the UNESCO formulation the broad social reach and combination of the individualized and collective fit with the potential spatiality of relations in higher education and knowledge. Common good is more compatible than public good with the global scale, given that public good implies the state and there is no global state. There is still the question of how to implement global common good in a nation-state world. What is missing in both UNESCO and Mazzucato is a global authority with sufficient persuasive power to bed down shared practices of common good.

To conceive of a global political authority, it is necessary to understand the world as a single political subject, which as noted is also consistent with the ecological imaginary. Higher education and knowledge can advance this thinking about one-world space.

Values of interdependence

Building a global commons in the higher education sector differs from building global economic markets, multilateral and bilateral diplomacy, national security and war. Higher education readily connects across borders via its core functions in learning and credentialling, research and knowledge. These are naturally relational, collaborative activities that normalize joint production and win-win outcomes, unlike the zero-sum logic of national security and geopolitics and profit-driven economic markets.

The values that combine the common good in the local, regional, national and global scales are *agency*, *negotiation*, *equality of respect* and in particular, respect for and the valuing of *multiplicity/diversity*. These values undercut the

prevailing trends (primarily but not only in the West) to nativism, monoculture and military conflict. They bring what have been narcissistic nation-states into a more instrumental relation with the local and the global. In practising these values students, graduates, scholars, researchers, leaders, universities, colleges, research institutes and their networks can make a historic contribution: to a human world that survives and evolves, and to a human/natural world that begins to flourish.

The world as a single subject

In his study of *All under heaven: The tianxia system for a possible world order* (2021), Zhao Tingyang points to 'the utter failure of international politics' (p. xiv) and the absence of 'worldness' (p. xv). The inter-national perspective lacks a sense of 'internalization', whereby all countries are included in the one-world system with no external element (pp. 14–17). Zhao notes the 1648 Treaty of Westphalia, which codified Western nationalism as the arbitrary division of the world commons, each nation having demarcated property rights. Without internalization, thinking is stuck in the national container, leading to the failure of scalar pluralism, the inability to imagine simultaneous activity in national and global scales.

This system of national sovereignty legitimized the fragmentation of the world; or to put it another way, the very idea of national sovereignty negated the concept of world sovereignty and of world interests.

Even though imperialism has an ambition to govern the entire world, it lacks a worldview that can take the world's interests as a standard. Imperialism is only capable of taking on a nation-state perspective. (Zhao, 2021, pp. 187, 216)

Assuming that the world level is recognized, how can it be configured in relation to its component parts without eliminating either? In governance, the EU with its overlapping regional European, national and local powers is a salutary example. Policy domains are divided into matters only the EU legislates such as trade; matters that both the EU and national governments legislate, such as research; and matters where only national governments legislate but the EU has a support or coordination role, like education. An important principle is 'subsidiarity' whereby decisions are made at the most localized level consistent with governmental effectiveness (European Commission, 2025).

At present such a multi-scalar system of governance is far from being achievable at world level. *Arguably, however, cooperation across scales and across*

difference can be advanced more readily in the higher education sector than in the inter-state system.

In higher education, if there is to be a conscious world order not wholly splintered into separated territories, how can the different social groupings (national, linguistic-cultural, and so on) relate to each other? This invokes two kinds of questions. First, those related to *horizontal* differentiation: multiplicity of norms, models, languages and cultures. Second, those related to *vertical* differentiation: hierarchies of systems, institutions, languages and cultures, hegemony and coloniality. The two modes overlap, horizontal distinctions can become vertical hierarchy, but the dynamics of each are different.

Horizontal diversity: Multiplicity

‘It is not the particular nature of heterogeneities but the fact of them that is intrinsic to space’, states Massey (2005, p. 12). Multiplicity is not just a goal or an educational principle, it is always there, a permanent tendency, and its nature is always changing. Variety is integral to ontology in all scales and at world level it takes especially strenuous efforts to homogenize or conceal it. Nation-building and hegemonic globalization rest on such efforts. Hence both are vulnerable to an upsurge of difference that collapses homogenizing control. In making space, multiplicity, relationality and change are closely intertwined and necessary to each other. Relationality is the intersection of multiple autonomous trajectories (pp. 55, 71). Interacting identities are defined as different in relation to each other (pp. 68, 71), enabling change to take place (p. 55): ‘We cannot “become” without others’ (p. 56).

How then does global agreement occur? There are rare intersections where many people share the moment, such as the planes hitting the Twin Towers in New York in 2001, or the death of Queen Elizabeth II in 2022, or Olympic athletics. More often, multiple trajectories carry multiple imaginaries. Relationality, even where the setting is expected to be cosmopolitan, as in higher education, creates ‘the challenge of negotiation of multiplicity’ (Massey, 2005, p. 141); the responsibility of coexistence; ‘the question of our living together ... the central question of the political’ (p. 151). Yet there are strong incentives to engage in this negotiation.

When grounded in flat democratic engagement based on equal respect, cultural diversity can be an immense resource in higher education and knowledge. It sustains a bottomless potential for exchange, cultural learning and intellectual excitement, and creative leaps forward, for ‘the known way

is an impasse' (Heraclitus) and 'the truth is never the same' (Foucault). We learn in the engagement in otherness, through the other, and the other world and the other life. Cultural difference is a continuing driver of lifelong learning. Massey and Foucault concur in arguing that encounters with difference have the potential to hasten the evolution of all the parties. At the same time, for this to happen in higher education, institutions and people must have enough common ground. How can multiplicity be arranged in relation to unity or harmony so that the relation is synergistic, with the whole and the parts each free to evolve without being configured in a zero-sum relationship?

The missions and mentalities of teaching, learning, research and scholarship, which are parallel in most countries so that in crucial ways higher education people across the world understand each other, facilitate co-existence. However, *how* they relate is important.

Tianxia. Chinese thought foregrounds *he er butong*, loosely meaning harmony without uniformity. Harmony presupposes and values the existence of diversity (Zha, 2024). Zhao (2021) sees *he er butong* in the tianxia system as a basis for ordering the world as a single subject. Yang et al. (2024) suggest it for cooperation in global higher education. When tianxia is world-centred rather than China-centred it offers a mode of global coordination that maximizes the freedom of the component parts without favouring any one location.

Tianxia rests on an 'ontology of co-existence' (Zhao, 2021, p. 114). It sustains a soft central authority based not on military or legal power but shared ethics and protocols, openness and connectivity, participation in common institutions, support for mutual improvement, and awareness of shared benefits including the value of 'mutual dependence and reciprocity' (p. 46). Participation is universal, according to the internalization idea: there is no 'other' outside the tianxia order. In principle it extends to the whole world. It also rests on marked devolution (p. 104) with relatively limited functions at the centre and open scope for cultural self-determination. Tianxia 'affirms a priori the world's plurality and relational compatibility, rejecting any one-sided, unilateral universalism and any form of cultural imperialism' (p. 114).

Nevertheless, in a tianxia order the binding principles must have sufficient moral weight to shape behaviour. In global higher education the shared principles in a tianxia order could include all-round academic independence, the free passage of ideas and persons, commitment to knowledge sharing and respectful dialogue, and the principle of reasoned and patient negotiation

itself. 'What matters most in realising what is good for self and others is a shared imaginative process' (Zhao, 2021, p. 89). Taking tianxia in higher education further, with states and corporations as well as universities, it could include agreement to cooperate on and jointly manage the development of AI in education and science.

Ecology of knowledges. Despite the hegemonic suppression in science (Chapter 9; Zhao, 2021, p. 213), given the diversity potentially on offer knowledge and research are promising domains in which to take forward multiplicity. The vast corpus excluded from the global system of published and bibliometrically classified papers and monographs includes knowledge in Indigenous languages, with an estimated 370 million speakers worldwide (Chakrabarty, 2023, p. 88). The Gramscian theorization of hegemony suggests the struggle to pluralize knowledge is about language, institutions and processes. Achilles Mbembe (2016) proposes a pluriversity in place of a university, with 'a process of knowledge production that is open to epistemic diversity. It is a process that does not necessarily abandon the notion of universal knowledge for humanity, but which embraces it via a horizontal strategy of openness to dialogue among different epistemic traditions' (p. 37). A universal book and journal regime of all-ways translation would greatly facilitate this process of dialogue (see Chapter 9).

Boaventura de Sousa Santos (2007) proposes an 'ecology of knowledges' in place of 'the monoculture of modern science', with 'sustained and dynamic interconnections' between heterogeneous knowledges 'without compromising their autonomy' (p. 66), as well as intercultural translation. 'This requires renouncing any general epistemology ... not only are there very diverse forms of knowledge of matter, society, life, and the spirit, but also many and diverse concepts of what counts as knowledge and the criteria that may be used to validate it' (p. 67). Santos (2007) does not want to weaken scientific knowledge. Rather, he promotes 'interaction and interdependence between scientific and nonscientific knowledges' (p. 70), including Indigenous knowledges. 'The point is not to ascribe the same validity to every kind of knowledge but rather to allow for a pragmatic discussion among alternative, valid criteria' (Santos, 2014, p. 190). What matters is that structural exclusion is discarded. Then diversity can become a methodological tool, with inquiry proceeding on the basis of 'radical co-presence' (p. 191). The ecology of knowledges does not mean replacing hegemonic knowledge with solely decolonial truth. As Raewyn Connell (2014) states: 'we don't want another system of intellectual dominance' (p. 218).

Vertical diversity: Relations of power

The obstacles to free multiplicity are formidable. As discussed in Chapter 7, multipolarity, a welcome flourishing of diversity, has triggered hard Euro-American pushback against global openness with no concessions to plurality. Competition, hierarchy and exclusion continue to structure global higher education relations. To foreground horizontal diversity some clearing of the scaffolding is needed. The pluralization of global capacity enhances the political resources for tackling the stratifying devices limiting the global space, such as monolingual journals and global rankings based on Anglo-American templates. Multipolarity provides conditions in which countries and universities in the global South and East can move into shared global leadership and shaping initiatives. While in 1990–2015 global higher education was developed as a hegemonic zone that was never the only possibility. It is less so now.

As discussed in Chapters 7–10, global higher education is a field of power articulated by neocolonial hegemony and inequalities between and within nations. Hierarchies elevate some agents and constrain the materiality and agency of many others. To what extent and in what ways has the evolution of global higher education since 1990 created, steepened or flattened these hierarchies? To what extent has it democratized opportunities worldwide?

World-Class Universities (WCUs). Like post-1990 globalization in general, the WCU movement has an ambiguous relation with inequality. In Anglo-American systems, WCUs have functioned as instruments of worldwide domination in language, epistemic contents and institutional norms and models, while also generating important common good knowledge. In some emerging countries WCUs have played an all-round constructive role in correcting global imbalances while lifting national horizons. They have contributed markedly to state and science building. However, within countries their social role is questionable. The dominant pattern is middle-class capture of prestigious universities (e.g. Boliver, 2013), so that WCUs steepen stratification in higher education systems and in society.

Hence a crucial supplement to WCU building is policy designed to deepen capacity further down national higher education systems – strengthening the middle level and local institutions, including both their research functions and their roles in resourcing local communities and modernizing cities; and widening the educational pathways between mid-tier institutions and WCUs so that there is more than one way into the universities at the cutting edge of

research. Systemic and social integration works better when the vertical 'stretch' between tiers is reduced. Systems such as those of the Netherlands and the Nordic demonstrate that it is possible to provide a wide spread of top-tier institutions plus well-resourced and socially supported second sectors with functioning routes into the top tier.

Mobile students. A systematic literature review of 'Social inequalities in international student mobility' by Sylvie Lomer and colleagues (2024) identifies research focused on socio-economic, gender-based and ethnic/racial inequalities in access to and completion of cross-border education. In countries with commercial international education programmes inequalities are more pronounced. Some mobile students are from wealthy families, but there is significant socio-economic stratification within the group and many are in poverty in the country of education. Given the private costs of mobility only government regulation and subsidization at scale can begin to equalize opportunities (Lomer et al., 2024, pp. 38–9). Research also identifies racism and discrimination faced by mobile students and their problems in language use, educational barriers, welfare, physical and mental health, migration regulation, housing, and exploitation in the workplace. The consensus of nearly all these studies is that mobile students are disadvantaged vis-à-vis local citizen students, and some studies also conclude that they are inadequately protected in terms of human rights (e.g. Marginson et al., 2010).

Relatively little attention has been given to research on the effects of cross-border mobility on social and economic stratification in the countries of student origin. Given that mobile students on average enjoy starting social advantages, if the international credential confers long-term advantages in labour markets and professional careers, global mobility can exacerbate overall social inequalities in home countries.

There is no one framework for interpreting power and inequality in the international and global sector (Lomer et al., 2024, p. 13). For example, there is no global polity nor a single global educational population for the fixing of benchmarks of representative social composition or guiding affirmative action strategy. However, judgements about specific orders, hierarchies and mechanisms are within reach. Material resources and status can be calibrated, for example in research in Chapter 9. Global relations of power are a fruitful domain for empirical research and for devising new tools of critical inquiry.

Methodological tools for global common good

Table 11.1 sets down questions about relationality and power in cross-border educational practices. Building on Table 10.1 in Chapter 10, and also Table 11.1, Table 11.2 suggests definitions of internationalization and globalization that incorporate decolonizing, non-exploitative and non-hierarchical relations. These definitions do not aim to be universal to all cross-border education. They focus on particular practices that can normalize common good.

How then to map a global common good space? Tian et al. (2024) develop metrics for measuring the generation of global common good, and higher education itself as a common good, in five domains: knowledge creation, people mobility, research collaboration, human well-being and cultural contribution. For the most part their framework rests on quantitative indicators with broad worldwide applicability.

Going further, how can a counter-hegemonic perspective be taken into the mapping of global space? *The key is to de-centre the hegemonic position*, which frees the imagination to enable the empirical observation of multiplicity. Massey (2005) critiques 'an imagination which ... starts from the "One" and which constructs negatively both plurality and difference' (p. 53). This is the traditional approach to comparative and international education, in which the scholar's own higher education system (which is almost invariably a Western system, often the US system) is used as the template against which other systems and practices are measured. It does not have to be done that way. In bilateral comparisons of higher education systems, one method of decentring is to conduct the comparison on a paired basis with a researcher from each system evaluating the other system and then combining the results. Taking decentring further, each researcher can use a comparative template drawn from the other's system to evaluate their own.

A further step is to develop what Amartya Sen (2002) calls a 'trans-positional analysis'. This is premised on three steps of reasoning. First, rejection of all processes of comparison based on a single cultural standpoint or position. Second, sequential exploration of multiple positions. Third, the development of a transpositional assessment. As Sen states:

Observations are unavoidably position-based, but scientific reasoning need not, of course, be based on observational information from one specific position only. There is a need for what may be called 'trans-positional' assessment – drawing on but going beyond different positional observations. The constructed 'view from nowhere' would then be based on synthesising different views from distinct positions ... A trans-positional scrutiny would also demand some kind of coherence between different positional views. (Sen, 2002, p. 467)

Table 11.1 Selected questions about relationality and power in global higher education

Global scale	
Cooperation in science and knowledge	Which knowledge is included in the recognized global pool and which is excluded (nations, places of origin, languages, disciplines, etc.)? Who has access to what knowledge and on what basis (factors of openness and cost)? Who makes the decisions about knowledge validation and inclusion?
Partnerships between universities	In a research partnership, who initiates? Who sets the terms? What is the division of labour? Who determines topic and method? Authorship? Resource flows?
Mobility of institutions	In a bilateral partnership between institutions, who initiates? What is the net flow of resources? Who sets the terms of the agreement and its monitoring?
Mobility of programmes	What is the operating basis? Home country rules, language, host country, a hybrid? How are governance and accountability configured? Resource flows?
National/international scale	
Cross-border mobility of persons for study	In considering bilateral relations between two countries, what is the balance of people movement (temporary and permanent) between them? What are financial flows between the country of student origin and the country of education, taken all aspects into account?
	To what extent are curricula and pedagogy transformed by educational mobility, i.e. what educational-cultural hybridity develops, if any?
	What is the socio-economic, gender and national/cultural/ethnic composition of mobile students and what subsidies are in play that affect this composition?
	What are the consequences of cross-border mobility for labour market and social stratification in (1) the countries of student origin, (2) the country of education?
Joint programmes with national agreement	Who initiates? Who sets programme terms and contents? What is the division of labour? Flows of resources, knowledge, people? Is ongoing dependency created?

Source: Author.

Table 11.2 Plural, democratic and reflexive global relations in higher education

Term	Definition
Equivalent internationalization	The advance of cross-border relations in higher education in which all nations or institutions in nations, and their cultures and languages, share common status, agentic autonomy and entitlements to justice.
Mutual internationalization	The advance of cross-border relations in higher education based on equality of respect, interdependent agency, justice and non-exploitation, free diversity, learning from the other, and shared responsibility for each other and the common good.
Decolonial internationalization	The advance of relations between higher education in former colonized and colonizing countries on the basis of equality of respect and agentic authority, non-exploitation, appreciation of diversity and shared determination to address the hierarchies, violence and other pathologies of the past and root out their reproduction.
Multi-polar globalization	The extension or intensification of worldwide relations in higher education on the basis of multiple agency, resources and status; in which no single centre, power bloc or culture is hegemonic.
Interdependent globalization	The extension or intensification of worldwide relations in higher education on the basis of openness, diversity, free connectivity of autonomous agents, mutual growth and learning, respect for others and for nature, and shared responsibility for each other, nature and the common good.

Source: Author.

Marginson and Yang (2022) apply Sen's method to a comparison between Anglo-American and Chinese approaches to the conceptualization of public good in higher education. The differences between the two contexts and discursive traditions are considerable, but Sen's configuration of the encounter between these two divergent others proves to be robust. The trans-positional method privileges neither system as the normative or methodological template. It finds that with one exception, the approaches to public good in each system are present in or compatible with the other system. The exception is Samuelson's (1954) zero-sum dualism between public and private good, which is incompatible with the role of the state in higher education as it has always been in China.

The transpositional method can clarify similarities and differences in the global higher education space. It can guide decentred cooperation between countries and institutions. It facilitates imagining the higher education world as a single subject. In modest but far-reaching moves like this, global higher education and global common good are advanced.

Individual and collective: A final thought

Arguably the way forward for societies – one that education can greatly facilitate – is to break with the old liberal/socialist polarity of a zero-sum trade-off between individual freedom and collective good, in which one is enhanced only at the expense of the other. The never-ending tug of war between liberalism and socialism plays out in the setting imagined by nineteenth-century economics in which social value is inherently scarce, and ordered hierarchically, and ecological resources are unlimited. All these assumptions are mistaken and costly.

The world needs both individual freedoms and collective interdependence, in settings in which social value is unlimited while planetary ecology is finite and must be carefully nurtured. It needs strong individual agents freely determining their own trajectories. It also needs those agents to be nurtured in social and ecological interdependence, and above all, in the social realm, in learning from difference, learning through the other: who look beyond themselves and take responsibility for the world and the other on the basis of harmony in diversity. ‘The truth is never the same’ and that is how human society moves forward.

When taking in the world, the transpositional method allows the participant-observer to engage the viewpoint of others and explore the potentials for integration, which is always incomplete (as multiplicity is both desirable and irreducible) but can grow over time. The transpositional method is a tool of harmony in diversity, a strategy for engaging with the other that sets in train a process of mutual learning while clarifying both similarity and difference. It can help both the individual and the collective to see more clearly. It is a source of hope and wisdom that is embedded in the common good, as learning always should be.

Maltfield Road, Oxford
20 April 2025

Appendix: Interviews Concerning National and Global Public Good in Higher Education in England, 2017–21

(See Chapters 3 and 8)

Interview	Type	Positions	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 (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/drama
U-8	University II	Mid-level manager-leader	Male	Music
U-9	University II	Faculty (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 (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 (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 (professor)	Male	Chemistry
U-25	University III	Faculty (professor)	Female	Politics

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

org. = National organization. Note that most of those designated 'manager-leader' held academic posts.

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.

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