



ADAM MICKIEWICZ UNIVERSITY, POZNAŃ

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# **The constructions of the public good and the common good in higher education in Poland**

**CGHE Seminar 105, Institute of Education UCL,  
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Dr Krystian Szadkowski, Center for Public Policy Studies



# Background

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Project affiliated with CGHE 1.1. *Local, national and global public good contributions of higher education: A comparative study in six national systems.* Directed by prof. Simon Marginson.

## Questions:

1. How the actors in the sector define and relate to the concept and the reality of the public good(s)?
2. What are the specificities of the national system and cultural tradition that shape the understanding of the public dimension of higher education in Poland?
3. To what extent the global public good play a role in the views of policymakers, institutional leaders and faculty members in Polish higher education?

Semi-structured interviews (36 conducted + 4 scheduled) and 2 case studies (University of Warsaw, Nicolaus Copernicus University of Toruń): June 2018 – May 2019.

Investigator: dr Krystian Szadkowski.

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# The Task of this paper

The  
Public  
Good

The  
public  
goods

The public



**Ontological**

The common

The  
Common  
Good

The  
common  
goods

Context - the growth of the discussions and the presentations of the idea of higher education as the common good (UNESCO 2015, Marginson 2016, Locatelli 2018; Szadkowski 2018). Many efforts have been made to operationalise the concept for the analysis of its development (Boyadjieva & Ilieva-Trichkova 2018), as well as for the investigation of the perceptions of main actors within a national system (Tian & Liu 2018).

The concepts of the public good and the common good have no clear boundaries, as they both express a more extensive normative call, and are often used interchangeably.

This paper continues and expands the sharpening of the conceptual distinction between the public good and the common good and grounding it in a specific empirical context of Polish higher education system.



# Polish Constitution and the Common Good

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The idea of the common good plays an important role in the Polish Constitution from 2nd of April 1997 (4 crucial mentions).

Art. 1 - The Polish Republic is the common good (*dobro wspólne*) of all the citizens.

Art. 82 – The responsibilities of the Polish citizen are the loyalty to the Polish Republic and the care for the common good.

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# Polish Constitution on (Higher) Education

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## Art. 70

1. Everyone has the right to learn. Learning is mandatory until 18 years old. The mode of performing the learning obligation is regulated by law.
  2. Learning in public institutions is free of charge. The law can allow for some educational services to be provided by the public higher education institutions on the fee basis.
  3. Parents have the freedom of choice of the school for their children that are different than the public ones. Citizens and institutions have the right to set up primary, secondary and tertiary institutions, as well as general educational institutions. The conditions of setting up and operation of private (*niepubliczne* – non-public) schools and the participation in funding them, as well as the pedagogical supervision over the schools, are defined by law.
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# Polish Constitution on (Higher) Education

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## **Art. 70**

4. Public authorities provide citizens with the universal and equal access to education. For this reason, they form and support the individual financial and organisational support systems for pupils and students. The conditions for providing the support are set by law.
  5. The autonomy of higher education institutions is granted under the conditions regulated by law.
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# Polish System – Brief Characteristics

	<b>Polish post-socialist neoliberal system</b>
<b>Character of nation-state</b>	Limited and openly subordinated to serving the needs of private economic entities. Centralized (nearly whole power and bureaucratic apparatus concentrated in the capital city). Anti-statism common.
<b>Educational Culture</b>	Two competing visions – education as a means for successful access to the labour market vs. education as Bildung. Open to all in society – at every level.
<b>State role in higher education</b>	Limited and exercised from a distance. Higher education of marginal importance during the whole period of Post-1989 transformation. Wide-spread collegial bodies at all level of governance. Autonomous deans -> Autonomous rectors.
<b>Financing of higher education</b>	Low levels of funding. Supplemented by private contributions during the peak of massification. Free tuition in public institutions as guaranteed by the Constitution.



# Polish System – Brief Characteristics

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## Dynamics of research

Research funded by government (basic and applied). Nearly non-existing contributions of the private sector. Due to the years of deindustrialization, low capacity of the economic environment to pursue frontline innovation and research. EU-cross-funded schemes of public investment in applied research with little material results.

## Hierarchy and social selection

Existing but less tangible hierarchies between institutions (public vs private and metropolitan vs regional). Competition for a place in university hierarchy mediated by maturity exam results. Vast demand-absorbing private sector (low or non-selectivity) plus lowering selectivity in public institutions due to the demographic decline. No WCUs.

## Fostering of WCUs

Recurring Ministerial agenda of WCU formation at the expense of introducing and steepening the hierarchy within the system. Mixed results as the idea meet hostility of parts of academic oligarchy.

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## The three main trends in Polish HE

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- **Post-socialist system and the role of the state in HE** - from 1944 to 1989 state played a substantially important role in higher education. Subjected to high level of political control, planning, external setting of research priorities, central allocation of graduates, imposed close connections with the socialist society and economy. Post-socialist condition in higher education is a widespread distrust of any relations between the HE and the state (felt on both sides).
  - **Declining demography and massification in reverse** – spontaneous, demand and market-driven massification met the objective barrier of a downward demographic trend. Negative consequences of this process caused distrust of fee-based education and the role of private sector.
  - **Reinstitutionalisation of the research mission and the recurring dreams of WCU** – Prolonged orientation on mass teaching contributed to deinstitutionalisation of research mission at Polish universities (especially in the social sciences and humanities). Current efforts to re-orient the system and re-introduce the research-related norms.
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## Law 2.0 – The Constitution for Science

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Recognising that the pursuit of knowing the truth and transmission of knowledge from generation to generation is a particularly noble human activity, as well as seeing the fundamental role of science in the formation of civilization, the rules are set for the functioning of higher education and conducting of scientific activity based on the following principles:

- The responsibility of the public authority is to create the optimal conditions for the **freedom of academic inquiry** and artistic creativity, **freedom of teaching** and **the autonomy of the academic community**.
  - Each and every scholar is responsible for the quality and reliability of his or her research and for the education of the young generation,
  - Universities and the other research institutions realize a mission of a **particular importance for the state and the nation**: they bring a key contribution to the innovativeness of the economy, contribute to the development of culture and co-create the moral standards that prevail in the public life.
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# Polish literature on the Public Good(s) in HE

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- Limited literature on the topic, as higher education research field was and is of a very limited size (Antonowicz 2018)
  - Jan Szczepański's books from the 1960s and 1970s with substantial discussion on the social function of higher education in the socialist country.
  - From the 1990s onwards – shift to the economic aspects of functioning of the public/private reality in higher education.
  - Duczmal (2006) – public contribution of the not-for-profit private sector.
  - Kwiek (2010 and 2016) – on importance of the changing public/private dynamics within the system and its ongoing recent de-privatization.
  - Musiał (2014) – hybridization of the public and the private.
  - Stankiewicz (2014 and 2018) – discursive role of the public good and the common good in the context of the debates on the reforms.
  - Szadkowski (2015), and Szwabowski (2015) – philosophical investigations on the limitations of the public/private dichotomy and the role of the common in thinking and designing the alternative scenarios for the university
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# The Public Good and the Common Good

- The interviewees were consistently shifting the discussion on the public good aspects to the debate on the common good or were using the concepts interchangeably.
- The idea of the public good as something state-defined, state-imposed, state-mediated or state-related was seen as something distant.
- If referred to – then described in terms of: harmony, solidarity, progress of rationality, well-being, political freedoms.

One of the interviewees (History) differentiated between the two ideas:

„**The public good** is something very wide, and **the common good** is a good of a particular group. If I act in the name of the public good, I have in mind, for example the good of all citizens of Poland, Europeans, or citizens of the world. But when I think of the common good - the common good of professors of history, the common good of the inhabitants of Warsaw rather come to my mind. It is an elitist - closed - concept to me.”

The concept of the common good was used more often in context of the higher education – especially in relation to: academic and disciplinary community, institution, civic society.



## Corrupted form of the common good

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Orientation towards the realisation of the common good in the context of higher education can take at least two forms: regular and corrupted.

„I think that the way of thinking about the common good in these models [...] differs radically from one another. [...] Because the only legitimacy for us to engage in these science-wide ventures is the excellence of our own science. It is difficult to tell others what they are supposed to achieve this excellency if you are doing the average science yourself. This is such a paradox. Such Catch 22. It seems to me that thinking about the common good at many universities is about protecting the status quo and protecting ourselves from others. Such a syndrome of a besieged fortress. On the other hand, we are thinking about the common good, trying to expand our thinking about the common good to the entire scientific community.”

The corrupted form of the common good is one that imposes a specific blockade to its development, traversing it with multiple hierarchies and reducing the powers of social production. It punishes alternative practices by using exclusion or/and division.

We can easily find the remains of this kind of corrupted form of the common in the forms of collegiate governance when it serves the purpose of reproduction of internal relations of power.

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## Autonomy and the role of the state

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The interviewees share a huge distrust for the state involvement in higher education affairs. The role they designed for public authorities is to secure the public funding for functioning of the autonomous academic system.

The vice-ministers for higher education and science shared similar distrust.

„For the last 30 years, the state has been entering very strongly and was involved in tertiary or secondary things, but we are trying to give up these things, we hope that the autonomy of the university and self-regulation of the academic community will manage” (MNiSW 1)

„As for the goals of the reform itself, the main assumption was to reduce bureaucracy, reduce the number of regulations and give more autonomy to universities, scientific institutions and scientists themselves. Which in general enables the essential operation of the whole system. This was undoubtedly the thing.” (MNiSW 2)

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## Impact on the city and the region – creation of the community

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One of the leaders described the main function that the regional university plays in its city as:

"Community-creation. It is an intellectual stimulation, but also building up of the commonality. [...] Students come and get the given order of things that existed here, they contest it, and change it. Then, they go. But this what they have created - remains." (UMK - Leader 1)

The transformative power of the regional university with the international aspirations is also opening the region to the otherness:

„We want to be a campus for the people, for those who come to us from all around the world. Also because of the people who come here from the region, for them to learn how to co-exist and cooperate with the international students within the university, and not to learn the stereotypes on the Internet. If we would give them this experience of the proximity of the other, other religion or other skin color, other ethnicity, they would learn about the benefits and drawbacks of such cooperation. This experience of the otherness is, I think, the public good. It is a campus-based public good, immaterial one, intangible, because it is relational.” (UMK - Leader 1)

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## Discourse of re-elitarisation in the name of the common good

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The common good may be used discursively as an „empty signifier” that presents the particular interest in the form of an universal claim.

„However, there is another problem. For example, we introduced this 1/13 limitation - that is, a limitation of up to 13 students per one academic teacher. What in practice in some universities, such as the large ones, limits the number of students, and thus, it can be seen that the number of available places at the best universities in the country will go down. [...] But in our opinion this is a important element and these universities have not been able to meet the education of such a number of students at this level anyway. And this is somewhat a struggle between this common good, understood as the need to educate the elite at a high level, and the broader access to the higher education, right? But this is really a fictitious conflict, because expanding this access de facto meant that we do not realize this common good understood as the elite good.” (MNiSW 2)

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## Fees for the public good?

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The most recent fees-related controversy in Poland (2017) touched upon the education of medical doctors and regulation against the brain drain.

"Let take an example of medical doctors. [...] They think, they may go wherever they want and they get sicken on any idea that they should pay back for their studies. I would say - no. They got the education - an expensive one. But the people say - it is a private good, because they are unaware what are the real costs. They seem to think that if the education is for free, then they should be provided with it like with water or air - because it is free. That it is their private good - but it is not true. The state contributes, everyone contributes. And I think that there should be some restrictions, that there should not be a situation when someone will get an expensive education, and then (s)he will immediately leave the country. It would be different within a European community, if there would be tighter integration and a single, common budget - then the case would be different. [...] So I think that in our situation, if the universities are funded from the state budget, then a person should shoulder some responsibilities towards the state." (UMK - Engeenering 1)

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## Reinstitutionalisation of the research mission and the limits of the peripheral condition

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The global dimension is not particularly important for the Polish policy makers.

„I think it certainly was not a guideline from the beginning, that our goal is to reform higher education and science to contribute to the global progress. This is a side effect of this process. The priority for us is to contribute to the good of this country. This is important. We know that it is not possible if we are not in global competition. So for us it is not a problem that we bring something into this global area.” (MNiSW 1)

Faculty members and university leaders emphasize the need to think on funding priorities from the perspective of global division of academic labour:

"I think that some form of patriotism is needed. First of all, the state or the citizens should fund such research that contributes to betterment of their life - in every respect: financial, social and economic. Secondly, these that we will use later, as the peripheral country." (UMK - Leader 1)

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## Contribution to the global common good of science

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Faculty members and university leaders think about the global contribution mainly in terms of academic output:

„In terms of quantity, the publication of about a thousand articles in the academic journals at the highest world level is an extremely important contribution to world science and shows our place in world and within the Polish science. It also seems that these examples show that UMK has a significant place in the production of common goods on a national and world scale.” (UMK, Leader 2)

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# Conclusions

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- 1. How the actors in the sector define and relate to the concept and the reality of the public good(s)?**
    - Blurred concepts: the public good and the common good.
    - The reality of the state-mediated/oriented public good – rather distant.
    - Relational and community-forming aspects – very important.
    - The common good aspects dominates over the private good and market-oriented aspects of HE.
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## Conclusions

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### **2. What are the specificities of the national system and cultural tradition that shape the understanding of the public dimension of higher education in Poland?**

- Historical distrust towards the state (even on the side of the state authorities).
  - Crucial importance of the institutional and academic autonomy.
  - Roman Catholic tradition of the discourse on the common good as a regulatory idea.
  - The common good as slightly more local and nation-oriented than humanity/global community-oriented concept.
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## Conclusions

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### **3. To what extent the global public good play a role in the views of policymakers, institutional leaders and faculty members in Polish higher education?**

- Global dimension play a limited role in the understanding of the higher education reality in Poland.
  - Contribution to the global science and the common goods pool of global science – important.
  - Opening up for the inflow of international students – beneficial for the creation of more sensitive local communities.
  - Awerness of the limitations coming from the peripheral status of the HE system on the capacity to equally benefit from knowledge produced and shared as the global common goods.
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## Conclusions

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- The reality of Polish post-socialist higher education system sheds new light on the rationale behind the use (and no use) of normative concepts of the public good and the common good.
  - The common good implies the existence of a specific community, bounded by specific ethos rather than an mediating institution of the state.
  - The common good may appear in the corrupted form or being instrumentally used as a discursive mechanism which hides the particularity of a specific group interest.
  - Discussion on the public good and the common good in higher education requires a root in material, rather than discursive only, reality.
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Thank you for your attention!

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**Recent conceptual works on the topic:**

Szadkowski, K. (2018). The Common in Higher Education: A Conceptual Approach. *Higher Education*.

Szadkowski, K. & J. Krzeski (2019). Political Ontologies of the Future University: Individual, Public, Common. *Philosophy and Theory in Higher Education* 1(2).

Email: [krysszad@amu.edu.pl](mailto:krysszad@amu.edu.pl)

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