

# 10. UNESCO's common good idea of higher education and democracy

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## INTRODUCTION

As was discussed in Chapters 1 and 2, higher education produces and provides conditions for the production of a broad range of social, economic, cultural and political outcomes (Marginson, 2016; 2020a; McMahon, 2009). Few of its outcomes take the form of tangible objects; though some are manifest as events, and various empirical proxies are used to track the processes and results of higher education. Most of its outcomes are below the surface, embodied in persons or groups, such as the acquisition of occupational skills, or manifest as changing social relations, for example the tolerance of difference acquired when studying languages or countries other than one's own. Social science struggles to theorise and observe this complex empirical terrain. In part this is because social science tends to fixate on the ways of seeing that are used by nation states, and for the most part their lodestone is the capitalist economy rather than a larger entity such as 'society' or 'culture' which would more fully incorporate the many engagements of higher education. In part, also, it reflects the genuine difficulty of comprehending something as diffuse and multiple as the outcomes of higher education, which connect to many agents with different perspectives and are constantly changing.

One useful distinction that can be made – though it is not made consistently in the literature – is that between individualised outcomes, that are specific to particular students or graduates, and collective outcomes, ranging from local communities or networks to the world as a whole. Figure 2.1 in Chapter 2 premised on this distinction, and makes a second distinction based on geo-spatial scale, between outcomes manifest beyond national borders and those solely local and/or national. (While Figure 2.1 provides examples of the four types of higher education outcome, it is not an exhaustive list.) The advantage of making the two distinctions used in Figure 2.1 is that they bring forward neglected aspects, especially collective goods, outcomes that

contribute to social relations and/or shared qualities or benefits; and global and international goods.

Collective goods, always a difficult problem in social science and government policy, are a principal preoccupation of this chapter. International goods pertain to connections between bordered nations ('inter-national'), while global goods pertain to the world as a single interdependent entity (Marginson, 2011b). In higher education there are many manifestations of cross-border connections, global diffusion and global systems, especially where knowledge is in play, including the networked global science system (Marginson, 2022; forthcoming). Knowledge slips freely across borders with lightning speed, though globally recognised knowledge is also structured by an inclusion/exclusion binary that omits nearly all knowledge in languages other than English, most knowledge outside the sciences and all endogenous (indigenous) knowledge (Connell, 2014; Marginson & Xu, forthcoming; Santos, 2014).

However, in Euro-American countries, the main discussion about the outcomes of higher education, as expressed in social science and government policy, is *not* focused on the agent-centred distinction between individualised goods, such as augmented skills or wages, and collective goods such as combined productivity, literacy or tolerance. As was discussed in Chapter 7, it is focused largely on the distinction between 'public' and 'private' goods, as framed by economics, where public and private are zero-sum in relation to each other – that is, the more public are the outcomes the less those outcomes are private, and vice versa. In this framework, the normative starting point is not the beneficiaries or co-producers of the goods, but the macro-economy and state. This reflects the central preoccupations of liberal capitalist polities with the role of government, the extent of the tax/spend obligations of government and the creation of opportunities for market profitability, within the always contested borders between the state, market, civil society and the family/person.

The public/private distinction was not designed to explain higher education, a distinctive sector, shaped by personal evolution in knowledge-intensive and culturally embedded institutional settings, that differs from commodity production in industrial economics and the circuits of universal value running through financial economics. When the public/private framework is retrofitted into the theorisation, observation and measurement of what happens in higher education, that framework does not work well. Higher education provides combined conditions in which individual students form themselves and this in turn contributes to the formation of societies, entailing multiple reciprocal permutations of the self and the collective. Are the reflexivities that are generated within and enabled by higher education 'public' or 'private'? Potentially, both dimensions are continually implicated in numerous ways. The only way to make a zero-sum public/private framework work is to radically limit the

defined outcomes of higher education. Nevertheless, the public/private framework is what we have in the English-speaking countries, and all of the countries influenced by Anglo-American ideas in social science and government policy that are transferred through the medium of neo-liberal policy economics. At world level the Anglo-American approach is currently the most influential framework for discussing higher education policy and funding – though the term ‘public’ does not translate identically into other languages, and zero-sum public/private distinctions are not culturally universal.

The framework of public/private has been supplemented by a secondary discourse about ‘common goods’, which again is derived from Euro-American tradition, but is more Western European in its resonances than Anglo-American. Common goods, which envision the beneficiaries as co-producers of shared outcomes, address certain problems in the public/private framework.

The chapter proceeds as follows. It begins with discussion of the real-world terrain of higher education that focuses on tendencies to massification and stratification, and the intersection with state strategies of privatisation and funding shared between government and households. Tendencies to the privatisation of provision and of funding, not universal but often pronounced, including in several large emerging country systems, have led to weakening of the discursive association between the shared virtues of higher education and ‘public’ provision by states. The chapter then moves to the conceptual terrain, noting the different meanings of ‘public’ and ‘public/private’ and their policy use, and pointing to the conceptual and practical impasse that has been reached. The final part discusses the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization’s (UNESCO) ‘common good(s)’ idea, which has been shaped for global reach, and constitutes one response to both the tendencies to massification and privatisation, and the impasse reached in the discourse on the ‘public’ role of higher education. The social dimensions of higher education for the common good idea are explored. The chapter concludes with reflections on the implications of the COVID-19 pandemic in higher education, which highlights the problems of financing a collective approach, but underlines the need for it.

## MASSIFICATION, STRATIFICATION AND PRIVATISATION

Between 2000 and 2019, just before the global pandemic, the tertiary education enrolment of the worldwide school leaver age cohort doubled, rising from 19.1 to 38.9 per cent. The number of tertiary students, more than half of them women and four-fifths in degree programmes, normally equated with ‘higher education’, increased from 100.2 to 227.6 million (UNESCO, 2021; World Bank, 2021). There were notable expansions in East Asia and the Pacific, and

Latin America and the Caribbean (Calderon, 2018). Nevertheless, there were continuing inequalities between and within countries.

While the gross tertiary enrolment ratio in 2019 was 87 per cent in North America and 73 per cent in Europe and Central Asia, it was 9 per cent in sub-Saharan Africa (World Bank, 2021). In addition, ‘disparities based on income and other factors of social marginalisation remain widespread, and this despite a variety of policy measures in recent years. Learners from higher income groups have retained their relative advantage in access to tertiary education across the world. Even in countries with high enrolment rates’ (UNESCO, 2015, p. 46). According to the 2016 UNESCO Global Education Monitoring Report, ‘across 76 countries, 20 per cent of the richest 25–29 year olds had completed at least four years of higher education, compared with less than 1 per cent of the poorest’ (UNESCO, 2017, p. 3). Differences between social groups in participation often widen as enrolment rates increase. The aggregate momentum for democratisation of opportunity is clear, and in many countries growing access is supported by scholarships, but such support can be captured by socially advantaged families. For many prospective students, the necessary academic and financial support is missing (UNESCO, 2017). If tertiary and higher education are public goods, or common goods, these goods are over-dominated by the affluent middle class, and unequally developed on a global basis.

### **Partial Privatisation**

The massification of higher education has put pressures on public finances. Many states have responded by engineering a partial shift of costs from government to households. This trend is more pronounced in some emerging countries than in the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) countries. In 2017, nearly 29 per cent of total expenditure on tertiary institutions in OECD countries was sourced from the private sector, after transfers from government to households for educational purposes are included in the calculation. This was similar to the level ten years earlier (OECD, 2010; 2020). Nevertheless, there is sharp variation between OECD countries in the private share of expenditure, mostly driven by differences in tuition fees. Households are the source of three-quarters of private expenditure on tertiary institutions in OECD countries.

In countries where tuition fees tend to be low or negligible, such as Austria, Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Luxembourg and Norway, the share of expenditure on tertiary institutions sourced through the private sector (including subsidised private payments such as tuition fee loans) is less than 10 per cent. In contrast, more than 60 per cent of funding on tertiary institutions is privately sourced in Australia, Chile,

Japan, Korea, the United Kingdom and the United States, which also tend to charge students higher fees. (OECD, 2020, p. 300)

In some large systems outside the OECD group such as Brazil, India and the Philippines, the private share of costs is much higher and has increased during massification (McCowan, 2019). These differences between countries have implications for the way higher education is understood, for example the extent to which it is seen as an individualised good or a shared good from which all benefit.

States engineer private expenditure in higher education in two ways. First, through increases in tuition fees for students in state sector or public institutions, which can create access barriers. 'Direct and indirect costs of studies in higher education remain the main cause of exclusion' (UNESCO, 2015, p. 46). The OECD has found that 'between 2010 and 2016, on average across OECD countries, private expenditure on tertiary educational institutions increased by 3 per cent on average each year while public expenditure grew by just under 1 per cent a year over the same period' (OECD, 2019, p. 2). Second, privatisation of institutional provision. Private institutions vary. Some are partly government funded, some not. Some are profit-oriented, some are non-profit. 'They may have owners or investors or operate as foundations' (Altbach et al., 2009, p. 79). What they have in common is that they are not required to respond to government to the same extent as public institutions. Much of the growth in higher education has been and continues to be in the private sector. In 2015 more than 30 per cent of students were enrolled in private higher education institutions worldwide.

[N]ew kinds of private providers have emerged, in the form of international branch campuses and international online providers. In Latin America, private enrolments account for 49 per cent of the total. In Brazil, Costa Rica, El Salvador, Honduras, Nicaragua and Peru, more than 60 per cent of students in 2015 were enrolled in private institutions, along with more than 80 per cent of students in Chile and Paraguay. In Asia, private enrolments make up 36 per cent on average, where countries such as Indonesia, Malaysia and Thailand are experiencing the same trend. Open education providers are also gaining ground. Gross enrolment rates in Turkey grew from 30 per cent in 2004 to 86 per cent in 2014 in part due to distance education enrolments. Over 1.7 million undergraduate students enrolled at Anadolu University in 2014, almost a third of all higher education enrolments in the country. (UNESCO, 2017, p. 2, citations removed)

In some countries such as Brazil the growth of the for-profit sector, a pure capitalist form of tertiary education provision, has been especially important in the expansion of student places.

## **Stratification**

The retention and worsening of the social stratification in massifying and high participation systems is a constant finding in research on higher education (Cantwell et al., 2018; Shavit et al., 2007). Stratification is apparent both in the extent to which different social groups access higher education and in who gains access to the highest status institutions that tend to be associated with the best life chances. The social stratification of the population tends to become aligned to the hierarchy of institutions. This cannot be attributed only to the part-privatisation of provision plus government-induced transfers of costs between government and households. Two other factors are in play.

First, there are structural tendencies to inequality hard-wired into the process of expansion of participation itself. As a higher education system grows, three things happen: it includes a larger proportion of the population in the system; the social value of participation is more differentiated between the larger number of institutions; and places in the most sought-after universities do not expand, or they grow at a slower rate than the system as a whole. Competition for entry into the most sought-after places is sharpened. These places are increasingly monopolised by affluent families with the best resources, insider knowledge and strategies with which to compete (Lucas, 2001). Unless egalitarian government policies are in place, the hierarchical structure of educational provision and the social hierarchy tend to reinforce and reproduce each other. High participation systems of higher education increasingly come to resemble society as a whole (Marginson, 2018b). While high participation higher education systems are more socially inclusive, all else being equal, their capacity to change social distribution might be less than that of systems with a lower level of participation, where a strategy of focused inclusion of under-represented groups can promote upward mobility.

Second, there may be deep-seated factors that inhibit the development of systems based on universal access to outcomes of equal value in higher education. Pursuing higher education as a public good would imply an ambition to make the sector non-excludable and non-rivalrous, that is, universal access. While this, or something like it, has been achieved in many countries in primary and secondary education, it has not been achieved in higher education. The French anthropologist and demographer Emmanuel Todd (2017), who focuses on the history of family values and patterns in social organisation in different parts of the world, argues that the combination of educational patterns and family values is foundational to society and economy. He finds that in individualistic Western countries, in which the nuclear family structure is dominant, there are no inheritance systems, and no fixed paths sustaining equality, the development of higher education has become inherently associated with inequality. In the third educational revolution which began in the US in the first

decade after World War II, higher education evolved as multiple and stratified, and was socially stratifying in turn. Only some members of the population achieved graduate status. Todd refers to an 'intellectual ceiling' (2017, p. 288), though where such a ceiling falls would be difficult to determine. Todd (2017) notes that Michael Young in 1958 anticipated the implications of the meritocratic principle, which led to social stratification based on the systematic educational selection of the population. While the universal access to primary and secondary education nurtured an egalitarian, democratic social subconscious, higher education fostered the idea that people were not equal. The function of higher educational institutions was not to emancipate citizens but to determine their classification and orientation. The faculty, who saw themselves as liberal, leftist and progressive, was in fact a powerful organisation that selected and educated the one-third of the population defined as superior.

Todd (2017) states that by the mid 1960s in the US, higher education had broken down the cultural homogeneity of society, detached people from the ideal of equality and readied them for economic disparity and the neo-liberalism of the succeeding decades. The crises of liberal democracies evident in 2016 in the UK with Brexit and in the US with the election of Trump were grounded in the social fragmentation resulting from educational stratification. In contrast, China and Russia are based on stronger community patterns, characterised by authority and hierarchy and less rooted in individualism, and have proven more cohesive. Todd argues that to render higher education systems more equitable it is essential to find counterweights to the individualistic meritocratic principle, grounded in a new social pact that incorporates the aspirations of society.

### **Problematisation of Higher Education as 'Public'**

The balance between the costs and returns of tertiary education is related to arguments about the summative character of higher education: public or private, collective or individual, or some kind of mix? It is widely assumed that the funding ratio between households and state should match a ratio of outcomes or benefits; even though there is no evidence that enhanced private benefits seen as associated with higher education (e.g. higher graduate earnings) necessarily mean that the public, collective or common benefits have diminished. Higher education affects not just graduates but society in general. Ironically, policy arguments for enhanced private costs are often advanced in countries where the average returns to graduates are *declining*, because of massification.

In that context, emphasis on the private benefits functions as a rationalisation of fiscally driven decisions to reduce the obligations of the state, and ideologies of higher education as a component of a capitalist 'knowledge

economy', in which the expansion of markets is seen as the precondition of economic competitiveness and prosperity. These policy ideas, together with the part-marketisation and part-privatisation of the sector, which tend to highlight the private benefit, and institutionalise the market mentality, problematise the concept of higher education as a shared and universal benefit and have undermined the understanding of the sector as primarily focused on 'public good(s)'.

## CONCEPTS OF 'PUBLIC' IN HIGHER EDUCATION

In the English-speaking discourse of 'public' and the 'public/private' the meanings are multiple, diverse and confusing. These were reviewed in Chapter 7, and will be summarised only briefly here.

First, the form of 'public' dominant in economic policy is in the dualistic pairing of public with private as an analytical device. Public/private are seen as two mutually exclusive halves of a whole, in a zero-sum relation. The public/private dualism has two forms (Marginson, 2018a). In one, 'public' refers to government or state, as in 'public sector'. Thus a national, state or public university is distinguished from a private university. In the other form, society is divided into two parts: the market setting where private property and commodities are exchanged and private goods are produced, and the non-market setting where government-owned property is organised and public goods are produced (Ostrom, 1990). This embodies the norms of a limited liberal state. The formula is irrelevant where the state has a comprehensive not limited mandate, as in, say, Norway or China; but together with human capital theory, which emphasises the private benefits, it frames Euro-American economic policy on higher education. Public goods are limited to residual functions (instances of market failure, such as basic research) and incidental spillovers from private transactions. However, the extent to which higher education is practised as a Samuelson private or public good is a function of policy.

The second use of 'public' begins with the idea of broad or inclusive assembly (*the public*, public opinion) and open communications ('going public', public media, public relations). This public is not opposed to private. The communicative inclusive public provides conditions for social interaction between individuals. This kind of 'public' is ambiguous in relation to the public/private dualism. The role of privately owned social media blurs the lines between public/private and polity/economy. This also points to the limitations of the universal communicative public as a democratic form. Power within this kind of public sphere can be notably uneven and there can be closure as well as openness. The socially inclusive public has resonances in higher education, which constitutes open social participation and is often strongly networked within local, national and global society.



The inclusive communicative public shades into a third more normative meaning of 'public' as the universal public good, an inclusive condition of welfare, virtue or prospect (Mansbridge, 1998). This notion has rhetorical power but is unclear in relation to agency. Ostensibly, it suggests the need to strengthen the functions and role of the state. Private actors cannot be expected to pursue the public good separately from their own interests (Locatelli, 2019). However, in Euro-American political cultures there is often scepticism about the claims of the state to embody the public good. Still, the broad-based public good can kindle hopes. It suggests that higher education contributes to common development, in contrast to a limited economic utilitarianism (Ver Eecke, 2008). Biesta (2012) remarks that becoming public is about 'the achievement of a form of human togetherness in which ... action is possible and freedom can appear' (p. 693). It is always essential to consider which public benefits are met, whose interests they serve, and who defines and regulates them.

### **International Variations**

While the English-speaking ideas of 'public' and 'private' have widespread influence, parallel or similar terms in other languages can carry differing meanings. In France 'public' combines the assembly of all citizens with a positive state not as limited as its Anglo-American cousin (Carpentier & Courtois, 2020). The state has larger responsibilities, and broader support, in the Nordic world, where it is often equated with society. There is less tension between private as individual and public as state. As extensively discussed in Chapter 7, in the Chinese civilisational tradition, the 'private' individual and household domains are not separated from larger collective entities such as the community or the state but nested within them. The reach and responsibilities of the state are not limited within a division of powers, but comprehensive in character. The state customarily intervenes in any sector to secure order and prosperity. 'The public' as the inclusive and communicative domain of all the citizens, in civil society rather than the state, is less developed (Marginson & Yang, 2022).

Despite the differences in political cultures across the world, economics presents as a universal discipline. The Anglo-American neoclassical economics of higher education has migrated with success to different political cultures and policy settings. Samuelson's (1954) zero-sum dualism is influential well beyond its home. From time to time it is invoked to explain the public/private split of costs, or in the advocacy of reform, in France, German-speaking, Nordic and Chinese debates. However, in all those jurisdictions the role of the state in financing remains stronger than in Anglo-America.

Meanwhile, in Anglo-America, as in most countries, the state remains a key actor in framing the character and role of the higher education sector. Some

governments exercise that role through direct state financing and provision; others primarily through managed quasi-markets. It is only where the state is unable or unwilling to retain control that the private sector is the primary shaper of higher education, as in the for-profit sectors in Brazil, Philippines and parts of sub-Saharan Africa, and in the vast largely decentralised sector of small low quality private colleges in the states in India. In these examples the 'public' presence, in all of the senses discussed above, is relatively weak.

### **In Sum: Limitations of 'Public Good(s)' in Higher Education**

In sum, in the Euro-American, and primarily Anglo-American, discourse in higher education policy, the term 'public' is so multiple and contradictory in meaning as to be incoherent. 'Public' is both political or economic, state-defined or market-defined, broadly inclusive or narrowly residual, and normatively negative or normatively positive. There is no consistency in the relation of 'public' and 'private'. In one meaning they are zero-sum, while in another the public is the aggregate of all the private citizens.

The 'public good' in its most widely used sense is understood as a condition of shared benefit, albeit poorly defined in terms of responsibility for its creation and the extent to which benefits are justly distributed. On the other hand, both politically and economically defined 'public goods' may constitute no particular benefits for a population at all. For example, when a nation state wages an aggressive war against a neighbouring state, it produces 'public good' in Samuelson's (1954) sense, and it is also 'public' in the sense of being state controlled, driven and executed. Yet it can be argued that this form of public action subtracts from the 'public good' understood as common welfare.

These problems in the notions of 'public good' and 'public goods' suggest the need for an alternative conception that is less normatively ambiguous, enables key issues such as distribution to be addressed, and positions both social commonality and the state in terms of democratic agency from below. In higher education policy there is a need for a policy discourse which aligns the formative effects of higher education for individuals with the collective social benefits: that is, a framework that acknowledges the contributions of higher education to both self-formation (including earning power) and social formation, without these outcomes being positioned as either separated or zero-sum. It is also necessary to address the collective outcomes of higher education much more fully than in Samuelson's formula, in that process moving beyond merely utilitarian economic approaches.

## HIGHER EDUCATION AND THE COMMON GOOD

For more than two decades UNESCO has sustained an evolving discourse about higher education as a public good and a common good. UNESCO, like policy makers and scholars everywhere, has had to wrestle with the difficulties inherent in the concepts of public good and public goods, and the problems of applying them in different political-cultural contexts. It has also had to contend with the contrasting perspectives of other pan-national agencies committed to marketisation of the sector.

### Public Goods versus Tradable Goods

In contrast with the discussion of primary and secondary education, discussions of 'public' in higher education have centred less on questions of state delivery and ownership than on issues of funding and the purposes of higher education institutions (Marginson, 2011a; Tilak, 2009; UNESCO, 2009). This reflects the fact that private sector institutions play a relatively strong role in the sector in many countries, and also a judgement that state funding and regulation are the most fundamental public elements in securing equitable and affordable higher education opportunities in the face of the striking inequalities affecting higher education worldwide (Marginson, 2016; UNESCO, 2017).

In 1998, article 14 of the UNESCO *World Declaration on Higher Education for the Twenty-first Century: Vision and Action* referred to higher education as a public service, since 'public support for higher education and research remains essential to ensure a balanced achievement of educational and social missions'. As UNESCO saw it, though shared public/private funding was often used, the role of the state continued to be essential in policy terms. At this time, the World Trade Organization (WTO) was developing its General Agreement on Trade in Services (GATS), including the transnational development of higher education through trade liberalisation. The UNESCO discourse asserted the concept of higher education as a public good rather than a tradable service or good, contrasting with the WTO and to an extent also with the OECD (2004), which shared some of the WTO enthusiasm for the potentials of international education as a tradable good. The UNESCO understanding also conflicted with that of the World Bank. In its 1998 publication on *The Financing and Management of Higher Education: A Status Report on Worldwide Reforms*, the Bank saw higher education mainly as a private market oriented good. 'The reform agenda of the '90s, and almost certainly extending well into the next century, is oriented to the market rather than to public ownership or to governmental planning and regulation' (Johnstone, 1998, p. 3). While recognising that public higher education was here to stay, the Bank

recommended that further expansion should take place in the private sector, with government regulation to take care of social equity.

In a UNESCO paper on *Diversification of Higher Education and the Changing Role of Knowledge and Research*, Guri-Rosenblit and Sebkova (2004, p. 57) argued that ‘seeing higher education as a “public good” is a particularly important consideration if higher education is required to meet the challenge of providing a mass quality higher education at all levels of the higher education system, from the top elite research universities to community colleges and professional tertiary-level institutions’. UNESCO maintained its concerns about the commodification of higher education services and the potential for the weakening of states in the governance of higher education system. The final report prepared for the UNESCO 2009 World Conference on Higher Education warned that:

[S]hould a GATS treaty be signed, or regional trade agreements take hold in more substantive ways, it would most likely contribute to the influence of for-profit providers of education and educational services whose products are rarely adapted to local priorities or need and undermine the ability of individual countries to regulate these entities’ (Altbach et al., 2009, p. 35)

The Communiqué of the 2009 conference emphasised that, as a public good, ‘higher education must be a matter of responsibility and economic support of all governments’ (UNESCO, 2009, p. 1).

UNESCO did not completely break with the other agencies. It noted that public funding could be complemented with private resources, even though ultimate responsibility lay with states. The final 2009 Communiqué stated that ‘while every effort must be made to increase public funding of higher education, it must be recognised that public funds are limited and may not be sufficient for such a rapidly developing sector. Other formulas and sources of funding, especially those drawing on the public-private partnership model, should be found’. The public good was to be delivered through policy oversight not a government funding monopoly. Interestingly, the Communiqué also stated that responsibility for collective benefits also extended beyond states: ‘higher education as a public good is the responsibility of all stakeholders, especially governments’. This foreshadowed UNESCO’s subsequent development of the idea of higher education as a common good.

### **UNESCO’s Education as a Common Good**

Following a period of internal discussion, UNESCO developed a new perspective on the public good problem, publishing *Rethinking Education: Towards*

a *Global Common Good* (2015). This entailed a double movement away from state-based approaches and towards grass-roots democracy.

The pamphlet argued that ‘both public and private sectors have a stake in the building of inclusive knowledge societies’ (p. 73). It noted the trend to privatisation of enrolments in many countries, which, when unregulated, pose dangers for access and quality. The state must continue to guarantee the right to education, ‘preserving the principles of non-discrimination and equality of opportunities in access to post-basic levels of education and training’ (p. 76). Nevertheless:

It is no longer clear what the notion of ‘public’ means in the new global context of learning, characterized by a greater diversification of stakeholders, by the weakening capacity of many nation-states to determine public policies. ... The nature and degree of private engagement in educational provision is blurring the boundaries between public and private education. This is evident, for example, in the growing reliance of public higher education institutions on private funding; the growth of both for-profit and nonprofit institutions; and the introduction of business methods in the operation of higher education institutions. ... The rapidly changing relationship of society, state and market is creating a dilemma. (UNESCO, 2015, pp. 76–77)

UNESCO (2015) noted the origin of public good theory in market economics, adding that ‘the transfer of an essentially economic notion to the field of education has always been somewhat problematic’ (p. 77). There was a common misconception that ‘public goods’ in the sense of non-rivalry and non-excludability had to be provided by states. It suggested ‘common goods’ as an alternative. ‘Common goods have been defined as those goods that, irrespective of any public or private origin, are characterized by a binding destination and necessary for the realization of the fundamental rights of all people’ (p. 77). While moving away from reliance on states and opening the door to the full range of non-state actors, UNESCO grounded the approach in Western European communitarianism: ‘The common good may be defined as “constituted by goods that humans share intrinsically in common and that they communicate to each other, such as values, civic virtues and a sense of justice” ... a solidaristic association of persons that is more than the good of individuals in the aggregate’ (p. 77). This had implications for the governance of education, which was necessarily participatory; and also for the governance of knowledge: ‘the creation of knowledge, its control, acquisition, validation, and use, are common to all people as a collective social endeavour’ (p. 80).

The turn to common goods implies both a larger role for civil society (UNESCO, 2015, pp. 80–81) and a continuing role for the state in regulating access and quality in the private sector (p. 82). UNESCO’s move constitutes a balancing act, with an inherent ambiguity. It is more difficult to guarantee equality of opportunity in this framework than one based primarily or solely on

state provision, especially as the state willingness to regulate non-government sectors tends to vary. On the other hand, the common good framework offers a new basis for installing social responsibility among private actors, overcoming the limits of the classical liberal framework in which – it is more a matter of hope than certainty – it is expected that the selfish pursuit of private interests will somehow aggregate to the combined welfare (the ‘greed is good’ notion). The common good norm constitutes a more virtuous setting, and grass-roots mechanisms for monitoring private embeddedness in shared projects. The flexibility of the common good idea also enables collective values to be pursued in a range of different societies with varying approaches to the role of the state, from the US to China (Tian & Liu, 2019), both of which have strong traditions of grass-roots community organisation.

### Developing the Common Good Idea

The use of ‘common’ as an adjective dates back to Roman law which designated certain things as common (*res communes*), for example air, running water, the sea and its shores. These resources are considered common by nature: they cannot be owned and can be used by all. However, it was not until the second half of the twentieth century that common goods, also classified in economics as common-pool resources or common property resources, were generally considered among scholars. The more recent interest in the commons derives from congestion issues, triggered by social over-use and ecological destruction. Garrett Hardin (1968), an American ecologist and philosopher, addressed these issues in an influential article in *Science* on ‘The tragedy of the commons’. For Hardin this denoted a situation where an individual, acting independently and rationally according to its own self-interest, behaved against the best interests of the whole community by depleting common resources.

In *Governing the Commons* (1990) Elinor Ostrom formulated an innovative hypothesis on how to avoid the tragedy of the commons. She argued that human beings do not always respond to egoistic and self-interest logics. Forms of cooperation can be found to avoid the overconsumption of a specific good or resource, while enlarging the community of beneficiaries. Conditions of sustainability can be determined by the communities themselves, managing their shared resources. Ostrom rejected the division of the world into state and the market, arguing that there are social forms that differ from ‘public’ and ‘private’. The ‘common’ does not necessarily designate a system of ownership and belonging but rather a method of governance and of consumption (Nivarra, 2012).

Although the classification of the commons has expanded to include natural, ecological, social and cultural goods, and more generically material and immaterial goods, there is a minimum semantic core with the following features: (1)

opposition of the commons to the dynamics of neo-liberalism; (2) networks of cooperation in communities; (3) instruments of participatory democracy (Coccoli, 2013). Arguably, in the field of education, the concept of 'common goods' is preferred to that of 'commons'. The latter seems less applicable to goods or services such as education, which require public institutions to play an important role in governance. Here the way that 'commons' is defined and used should not be confused with the concept as framed within the economic theory and presupposing rational-optimising actors. Common goods are not goods as in the economic idea of public/private goods, but goods in the broadest sense: tools, activities, values, rights and processes (Locatelli, 2019).

The concept of common goods provides an alternative to the spread of market policies in private and public domains. Common goods exceed the more instrumental concept of public goods. Unlike public goods, some of which can be enjoyed as individual goods, common goods necessarily require forms of collectivity and shared governance both in their production and enjoyment (Deneulin & Townsend, 2007; Taylor, 1995). These goods are grounded in the cultural and social dimensions of community and identified for their contribution to the general interest, including conditions of justice and well-being. The concept of common goods at the micro-level is related to the macro-level, *the common good*, 'understood in terms of social solidarity, social relations based on universal human rights and equality of respect' (Marginson, 2016, p. 16). Table 10.1 distinguishes between public goods and common goods on the basis of principles and theories, nature, governance and value.

The foregoing argument suggests that the practical task in higher education is to develop new approaches that strengthen participatory and deliberative processes and sustainable and equitable institutions. Higher education as a common good emphasises the intrinsic and societal value of higher education institutions whose purpose is to extend human understanding through the three functions of teaching, research and community engagement. It suggests the university is a shared societal resource, and calls into question the utilitarian model of higher education as an individual socio-economic investment. It favours a humanistic approach, and enhancement of the cultural, social and relational dimensions of each educational process. It highlights the pursuit of learning as a shared endeavour and responsibility, with implications for the organisation of higher education systems, including participatory processes and sustainable forms of cooperation grounded in diverse realities.

Higher education as a common good highlights the relational dimension of teaching, in contrast to the trends to separation and individualisation in the education process that are associated with the market model. It foregrounds not only the usefulness of research, but the longer perspective. The third mission of universities becomes more important than before: it contributes to the envisioning of new social structures and to democratic development.

**Table 10.1** *Comparison of public goods and common goods*

	Public goods	Common goods
<b>Principles/ theories</b>	Equity and social justice	Besides equity and social justice, also solidarity and cooperation
	Political economy theory	Philosophical and political perspective
	Subjective conception of rights	Relational conception of rights
<b>Nature</b>	Can be enjoyed as individual goods	Necessarily shared, both regarding production and benefits
	Non-excludable and non-rivalrous characteristics presented in terms of consumption of a commodity	Non-excludable and non-rivalrous characteristics presented in terms of participation and generation of the goods themselves
	The public quality is predetermined	The common quality is dynamic and not pre-existing
<b>Governance</b>	Public governance justified on the basis of externalities which extend to all	Shared governance justified on the basis of the cultural and social value of a specific good
	Result of the action of public institutions	Result of the interaction of the different components of society
	Top-down approach	Bottom-up approach
	Passive role of those who benefit	Active role of those who benefit
	Formal democracy	Substantial participatory democracy
<b>Value</b>	Limited to the provision of facilities and services to a certain national community	Necessarily imply the empowerment of all actors who have a right to a fully informed and critical participation
	Neutral context	Acknowledgement of the diversity of contexts and of the cultural and social dimensions of a specific community
	Instrumental, can be treated as economic resources	Cannot be reduced to economic resources or to factors of production because of intrinsic social and relational value

*Source:* Locatelli 2018.

The engagement imperative points in the opposite direction to international rankings, which create pressure to prioritise elite research over local engagement (Chankseliani and McCowan, 2020). Higher education as a common good offers a way out of current limitations. ‘Universities are embedded in a global economy of knowledge and are shaped by its inequalities’, states Connell (2019, p. 191). Yet their privileged position allows them to question imbalances of power in the governance of knowledge, and counteract trends



to knowledge commercialisation, if they choose to do this (Biesta, 2007). In reality, the creation of knowledge is always a collective process which is intrinsically shared and, to subject it to market principles, including individualisation and commodification, is to disguise this. The concept of higher education as a common good highlights cooperation within the higher education system. Connell argues that:

A good university system is cooperative rather than antagonistic and competitive. Whatever the level of resources, the work will be most effective – and efficient – if universities consistently give each other respect and support. Only a system organized for cooperation will allow specialization, division of labour, regional and institutional diversity, and sharing of facilities, without institutions having to fear they will lose status or money. (Connell, 2019, p. 175)

## CONCLUSION

The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted the central role of higher education and the expectations that surround it. Despite the difficulties, enrolments have been maintained and even increased in many countries; and during periods of shutdown of in-place institutions, desires for the resumption of face-to-face learning and the common sociability have been profound. More generally, the pandemic has drawn attention to the interconnectedness of societies and the fact that such global challenges can be promptly addressed only through cooperation. The concept of the common good can be ‘the central pillar around which a more equitable and sustainable post-pandemic model of education may be built, and a guiding principle by which we may reform our higher education practice’ (Brotherhood et al., 2020). At best it opens the prospect of beginning to mitigate the effects of the steep social stratification that has developed in the last 40 years (Piketty, 2014). A new societal and educational pact is necessary if we want ‘to reverse the growing gaps between rich and poor countries, between well-endowed and resource-limited institutions, and among learners’ (Salmi, 2020, p. 12).

The pandemic has emphasised the fragility of higher education in those countries where the market imaginary is uppermost. Higher education systems dependent on student fees, in which higher education is seen as a private good and is therefore open to consumer resentment at every subtraction from the expected service (compounded by the tendency of institutions to promise more than they should), have proven more fragile than the public good systems during the pandemic. Many private institutions in different countries across the world have been forced to close. The universal move to online teaching has raised issues of equity for students who have limited or no access to the Internet: ‘not all students have devices that can connect and many such devices are unsatisfactory for the full range of learning functions. Access to

digitally-based education is mediated by social factors as well as national location and geography within nations, and affects wealthier countries as well as poor countries' (Marginson, 2020b, p. 6). The pandemic has also highlighted issues of access and retention. Students from poorer backgrounds who need to work during term have found it difficult to support themselves. These equity issues are deeply felt and widely discussed in market-based systems as well as others, suggesting there may be a core support for certain common good values in all countries.

The serious economic problems caused by the pandemic may place enormous pressure on future higher education budgets, as governments will have limited financial capacity. Nevertheless, despite this factor, which may propel some governments to push higher education towards greater private funding and justify that with the discourse of private benefit, the stop-start dynamic induced by the pandemic opens the possibility of reframing the purposes of higher education as a common good.

The concept of higher education as a common good allows collective goods in higher education to come into their own. It matches collective outcomes with collective agency. It also presupposes a different model of interaction among universities, moving beyond a narrow competitive perspective. It suggests scientific and academic cooperation in which the objective is not only to improve the single institution, but society as a whole. Since higher education is one of the principal factors driving social inequality, greater equity within the system is one precondition for creating stable societies grounded in democratic culture and values. Public funding and regulation are necessary to promote equity, but this alone is not enough to counteract existing inequalities in higher education. In addition, a new approach and model should be developed which allows universities to be truly engaged in civic and social life, as summed up in the following quote by the Italian politician and intellectual Aldo Moro:

If you want the University to be a serious place that does not give the impression of somewhere empty, closed and outdated ... let there be life there, let society with its doubts be reflected, and let the difficulties of human coexistence be understood and dealt with. Let this small society be a bridge to life. (Moro, 1946)

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# Assessing the Contributions of Higher Education

Knowledge for a Disordered World

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