CGHE conference: The public good role of higher education
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The public and common good role of higher education

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[*Opening slide*]
Welcome to the CGHE conference on the public good role of higher education! Today we tackle a vital and neglected aspect of higher education: its larger contributions to persons and social relations, beyond the individual pecuniary benefits, the degrees and earnings, that are the limit of neoliberal systems.

[No person is an island]
In this research we acknowledge that 'no person is an island', as John Donne should have said. The non pecuniary domain of higher education, its 'public' realm, has two aspects: the long term self-shaping of graduates including their agency, lifelong learning, and democratic capabilities; and the collective outcomes of the sector for communities, national societies, and the world. The collective outcomes are the most neglected in neoliberal policy and regulation.

We focus today on what higher education does for those *not* enrolled as well as those enrolled, on the many-sided effects of knowledge, and on the potential personal transformation of more than 250 million tertiary students enrolled across the world, that can feed into social relations. This project, and this conference, are a sustained attempt to break out of the limitations imposed by neo-liberal economic policy in higher education.

[Where is the *common* good? Where is the *global* common good?
But, you might say, at a time like this isn't a conference on the relational public and common good of higher education a luxury? And hasn't the 2016 critique of neo-liberalism, in which the project began, before Brexit and long before Ukraine and Gaza, been rendered obsolete by what has happened since?

It is true that since 2016 much of the world has slid into nativist politics, geo-political conflict, talk of war, and actual war, with inevitably impacts in higher education. A new political culture is spreading. It combines two elements. First, the neo-liberalism already entrenched in many countries, where the object of policy is not human society or ecological integrity but capital accumulation in the market economy, and people take responsibility for their own survival. The state has no obligation to them unless they command capital. While

nativist neo-liberals make populist gestures in the form of income transfers they do not finance universal water, housing, health care or higher education.

Second, hyper-patriotism and unquestioning loyalty to the state. The ideal nativist neo-liberal state is Putin in Russia. Putin is not an outlier, he is the extreme version of Modi in India, Trump in the US, Milei in Argentina, Erdogan in Turkey, Orban in Hungary, Netanyahu in Israel and the far-right parties making gains in Western Europe. Between neo-liberal policy and autarkic nativist aggression, where then is the possibility of the *common good*? With capital accumulation driving us over the ecological cliff and nations becoming more hostile, where is the *global* common good?

As I see it nativism, with its would-be bordered identities, deep distrust of difference, anti-cosmopolitan attacks on universities, and endemic resistance to migration including fear of international students, is a defensive response to three profound human anxieties. First, the declining living standards and poor economic prospects which are fostering personal and family insecurity. Second, in Western countries, the irreversible decline of Euro-American global dominance, in a multi-polar world in which China, India, Indonesia, Iran, South Korea, Brazil and other non-Western countries are rising, undermining the old comforting Western certainty of racial superiority. Third, the climate-nature emergency, and the stark fact that states cannot address it either separately or together, flipping whole populations from hope to pessimism about the future. These three sources of anxiety are destabilising politics, especially in the West, and driving the retreat into singular identity, which becomes a goal in itself.

[Higher education and the public and common good – *contents slide*]
In this setting, our focus on the public and common good is not obsolete. It is more relevant than ever. The public and common good is the exit sign from a world which continually manufactures its own disasters, the world of nativist neo-liberalism and deliberate ecological collapse. It is policies based on capital accumulation that are obsolete, not the public good. It is geo-political hostility and militarism that blocks action on the climate nature emergency, not those advancing the global common good in higher education and science.

In this project we started by defining the collective outcomes, and the non pecuniary individual outcomes, as *public goods* produced in and through higher education. Public goods taken together comprise the singular 'public good'. There is also the common good but I'll get to that later. Today I will work through the foundations of our project, its critique of neo-liberalism in higher education, the rationale for and methods of our comparison between national systems, and the global dimension.

[The doctrine]

We began this project in 2016 in high frustration with the economic policy vision in marketised Anglophone higher education systems – the doctrine that all that mattered were the private pecuniary benefits associated with graduation, and the contribution of research to profitable industrial innovations, and together these were the sum of the economic and social value of higher education. Neoliberal economics modelled students as consumers and as walking units of human capital with unequal value, universities as local and global businesses, and higher education systems as competitive markets. The 2012 reform in England fixed the student fee as the unit of resource. Students financed higher education, full stop, including its collective benefits. Not that those mattered. Collective good was invisible.

Yet in 2012 everybody knew that graduate salaries were shaped by social origins, and schooling, and labour market networks, as well as by higher education. Many knew higher education provided *much more* than individual pecuniary benefits, from reproduction of the professions and services in health and education; to the contributions of institutions to local economies, cities and regions; to knowledge, culture, criticism and public intellectual life; to policy and the work of government at all levels; to enhanced tolerance and political connectedness; to global learning and peaceful cross-border relations.

Many also knew that higher education helped to form students as socially responsible citizens and as persons with reflective agency, using knowledge throughout life, what Gert Biesta calls the socialisation and subjectification functions of education. People are not reducible to walking economic value.

The problem was that the government in England in 2012 wanted a universal consumer market and graduates as human capital. Apart from supplementing that market with funding for widening participation, meaning access to the private good, and research, it would not recognise or fund anything else.

Economic policy in English higher education was and is grounded in methodological individualism, whereby, as Steven Lukes states, society and social phenomena are explained solely in terms of facts about individuals. High individualism has intuitive appeal at a time when, as Clara Miller states, social media foregrounds self-display and 'one gets accustomed to negotiating one's own reality, losing touch with the notion of the common ground'. But it takes out a large piece of the puzzle. Margaret Thatcher, an arch methodological individualist, said that 'there is no such thing as society'. She had no apparatus with which to see social interconnections and collective outcomes, in which the whole exceeds the sum of the parts. The counter argument is that the collective domain is real, material, more so in higher education which brings people together, and where knowledge is formed in the accumulating contributions of many persons and groups. Knowledge, like society, has both

individualised moments and a collective conversation. It is not either/or, individual or society. It is both. One cannot exist without the other.

[Individual trees and the collective wood]
Consider an analogy, the old growth forest, with its multiple species and trees of different ages. Beneath the surface of the earth plants and fungi form partnerships known as mycorrhizae [MIKE-OR-RIZE-EE]. Threadlike fungi envelop and fuse with tree roots. The fungi help trees to extract water and nutrients such as phosphorus and nitrogen, in exchange for part of the carbon-rich sugar the trees make through photosynthesis.

[Individual trees and the collective wood – *slide 2*]
Fungal networks link the roots of each tree in the forest. Carbon, water, nutrients, alarm signals and hormones pass from tree to tree through the subterranean circuits. Trees collaborate, sharing the sunlight in the canopy without blocking each other. Resources flow from older trees to the young and small that cannot yet reach the sun. The forest consists of autonomous single trees that joined together. All that we see above grounds are the single trees, we cannot see the connections. But they are real. So it is in human society. Our social relations are invisible to direct observation but have material force. They shape our inner mentalities, our behaviour and the course of our lives.

[The economic policy dualism:]
Before I turn into Chris Packham and start growing leaves, let me return to economic policy in higher education. There the form taken by methodological individualism is the Paul Samuelson's 1954 theorisation of public and private goods, which restricts the scope for public goods.

For Samuelson, productive activity takes the form of private goods in economic markets, unless there is market failure because the good is non-rivalrous or non-excludable. Then government or philanthropy steps in. Samuelson conceived a zero-sum relation of public and private goods. This means the more higher education is private the less it is public, and vice versa. Samuelson considers only capitalist economic value, not social value such as distributional equity. Defining public goods solely in terms of market failure and externalities stymies the positive freedoms of government. As Mariana Mazzucato says, 'the public sector is understood to fill the gap created by markets, rather than setting ambitious objectives and promoting collective action towards achieving them.' In higher education the implication is that while basic research is subject to market failure and needs state funding – or a philanthropic transfer from international student fees! - teaching and degrees are private goods and the student must pay. This justifies student tuition and limits state funding.

[Public and goods do not have to be zero-sum]

The zero-sum dual between public and private goods is unrealistic. The material life of individuals, and collective state of society, continually overlap. Each provides conditions of existence for the other. But Samuelson's formula has been politically potent because it naturalises minimal public goods, minimal spending, and the ubiquitous rhetoric of private benefits in higher education. In emerging countries, cost-sharing is presented by international agencies as the route to educational massification.

Samuelson is consistent with the goal of capital accumulation that constitutes the dominant system of value in Anglophone polities. To retrieve the broader social and personal contributions of higher education we must move beyond the Anglophone world which still dominates the policy literature on higher education. Because higher education systems are embedded in states, public and common good are implicated in government and political culture. This means looking at higher education in diverse national-culture traditions. That is what we have done in CGHE's project on higher education and public good.

[The comparative project investigates]
So far I have provided the rationale for the research project. I'll now move to the framing of the research.

The research was not founded in a common definition of public good in higher education that was applied in each country. Meanings of 'society', 'state', 'government', 'public', 'private' and 'higher education' are not uniform or fixed. They are nationally culturally and linguistically nested. `We had to start somewhere, so the project began with Euro-American and Anglophone notions of 'public good' and the 'public/private goods' that it sought to critique, but immediately moved beyond them. Rather than normalising the Anglophone concepts as the basis of comparison, we relativised them, provincialising them, setting them in national-cultural context alongside other national-cultures. The study is framed as theoretically open. Insights can come from anywhere.

So at the beginning we asked the questions 'Is it the same elsewhere as in the Anglophone world? How are the 'public' (or nearest equivalent) non-pecuniary individual outcomes and collective outcomes in higher education understood by practitioners and policy makers in other jurisdictions, with due regard for lexical issues? What can countries learn from others?'

These questions could only be addressed by a cross-country team, by empirical studies embedded in the different national-cultural contexts, and by a mode of inquiry based on autonomous researchers that was sufficiently flexible to enable the national-cultural distinctiveness to emerge in full.

[Studies of higher education and public good]

The original 2016 ESRC-sanctioned plan included six country studies, in France, Finland, UK, United States, Japan and China. Subsequently South Korea, Canada, Poland and Chile were added, though there were insufficient interviews in South Korea to constitute a full country study. The research was affected by the Covid-19 pandemic: some interviews were conducted online and the field work in the US planned for 2020 was postponed. It is happening this year, led by Rebecca Schendel and Gerardo Blanco at the Boston College Center for International Higher Education. Rebecca is here with us today.

We are indebted to Krystian Szadkowski in Poland, and Carolina Guzmán-Valenzuela in Chile, countries and researchers not in the original ESRC bid. They self-financed and carried out parallel studies using the same questions.

In each country we interviewed faculty and leaders from at least two research universities, one with strong global links, and in engineering, social sciences and conjoint fields. In all but two countries we also interviewed policy makers, regulators and other policy professionals. Between us we conducted 236 interviews prior to the US study, including 40 outside universities. The researchers in each country have prepared national studies, including a review of relevant policies and of the national language parallels to the Anglophone terms public good, common good and global common good. Lexical analysis has taken us further us into the distinctive character of each case. Researchers will refer to lexical aspects during the conference programme today.

[Lili Yang book cover]
The project also included a doctoral study by Lili Yang which compared public good outcomes in higher education in China and the Anglophone world. This led a book and a transpositional analysis across the Sinic-Anglophone divide.

[Transpositional analysis]
What do I mean by transpositional analysis? The ultimate question that the project asks is: 'Is it possible to develop a combined or generic framework for defining, observing, and monitoring the public outcomes of higher education, one that can break free of the neo-liberal restrictions on imagining those outcomes, while accounting for the global range of principles and practices?'

Exploring the similarities and differences across countries brings forward a richer set of ideas and reflexive mirrors than any one tradition offers. As with all cross-border comparison it also allows each national-cultural tradition to see itself more clearly. It also suggests possibilities for borrowing. Taking all traditions together reaches new depths in understanding higher education. The comparative project helps not only in identifying worldwide diversity, but also what higher education everywhere has in common. How then are national approaches compared and combined, if none are the privileged template for

comparison? Amartya Sen theorises a 'trans-positional' method of comparison. A trans-positional comparison does not normalise one party to the comparison as a template for examining the other, as in the older traditions of comparative education. Rather, it defines the different cases for comparison in parallel to each other, and then integrates the heterogenous cases to the extent possible.

[Anglophone ideas of 'public' and 'private']

I will now pass to conceptual issues arising in the study, aspects of the public and common good in higher education. As I've stated, our jumping off point is the Anglophone meanings of 'public good' and 'common good' and 'public/private', though we do not stop there. The English term 'public' is ambiguous with multiple meaning, and this is helpful in opening a wide terrain.

[Political 'public' as state]

The most straightforward meaning of 'public', paralleled in all eight countries, is the notion of public as the state or public sector, coordinated by the central agencies of government. In all societies the state is the essential repository of the collective will. We must expect it to function in the common interest, though at times states are captured by inherited property, accumulators of economic capital, military power or political organisations. States are not natural formations. State building requires strenuous and continuous effort. In all countries in this study higher education is nested in the state and assists in building the nation state though the type of embeddedness varies.

The Anglophone limited liberal state is one remove from the social sectors it regulates. In Nordic nations like Finland, according to Jussi Valimaa, the state, including the university, is equated with society as a whole with accountability from both above and below. Nordic higher education emphasises engagement with stakeholders and socially responsible research. In East Asia the state is not a limited liberal state, it has comprehensive responsibility and intervenes in any sector at will. It sets policy objectives and expects them to be pursued; though Sinic governance in higher education and other sectors also has deep devolution within central control, with bottom up agency and responsibility.

[Normative-universal 'public good']

The generic 'public good', universal welfare or beneficence under the auspices of the state, which has lexical near equivalents in most of the countries in our study, is what social theorists call a 'thin' concept. It has broad appeal – who can disagree that higher education should serve the public good? – but as Bruce Sievers states 'it lacks the depth of meaning conferred by historically lived experience'. The more specific we get, the more difficult it is to sustain agreement about 'the public good'. As Krystian Szadkowski says in this project, 'one way to view the term "public good" is as an "empty signifier" which we (society, higher

education staff, scholars, policymakers) fill with multiple meanings, shaped by differing social relations in our given context and time'.

But the normative-universal 'public good' sits alongside more robust concepts that speak to the organisation of society, such as the social order or the moral order, which in some countries is signified simply by the word 'democracy'. This poses the questions 'what are the key of elements of a social or moral order that enable persons, groups and localities to flourish together?', and 'what is the contribution of higher education to the social or moral order?' Which of the common values of society should higher education inculcate? Societies differ on the responsibilities of higher education in that respect.

[The socially-inclusive communicative public]

There is also the socially-inclusive public, as in 'public opinion', the 'public media' and even the public as the universal taxpayer or the electorate. This is more concrete than the public good. It derives as much from the Western European public assembly or town piazza, under the auspices of the state, as Anglophone usage. It has presence in Latin America and India but more limited resonance in East Asia. There are different angles. It often refers to networked communication, as in public intellectuals, and Habermas's critical public sphere, the network of watering holes, clubs, institutes, salons and newspapers where people discuss the events of the day, criticising state policies and generating alternatives. There is also the privatised universal public of Google, Apple, Meta. Social media is a potent form of inclusive communication, but the digital world is being bent to the logic of capital.

Higher education intersects with the socially-inclusive communicative public in various ways. Craig Calhoun suggests universities can be critical public spheres, an episodic role carried by activist students and faculty. While institutions are not good at speaking to all citizens, they put resources into communications and both constitute and intersect with particular publics. The national studies do not talk much about critical public spheres, except in Carolina Guzman's work in Latin America, but there are many references to social engagement.

[Analytic economic 'public/private' dualism]

The other main Anglophone meanings of 'public' is the public/private dualism in economics. You have already heard me on this topic. It is central to policy and regulation in England where it frames a competitive quasi-market in higher education and minimises spending by the state. The public/private dual in economics originated just once, it never appeared in other traditions, but as you will see today, it has gained at least some level of influence in higher education policy in all country cases, even in social democratic Finland.

Samuleson public goods are not intended to provide broadly distributed social value, they provide conditions, such as the rule of law, that facilitate capital accumulation in the market

economy. The sole value is economic value. Public goods such as free places or research are vulnerable to capture by elites; and the quasi-market in private educational goods fosters stratification between institutions, and elite capture of the most valuable student places. Despite policies of widening participation, there is no advance in social mobility.

[Higher education and common good]
While all the meanings of the word 'public' in English connect with higher education, and have different resonances in the countries in the project, the term 'public good' is ambiguous and contaminated by economic constraints. UNESCO's idea of 'common good' in education is designed to address these limitations. Common good is more normatively specific than 'public sector' and broader than Samuelson non market goods. It is political not economic. Classically it is focused primarily on participation in local communities, and associated with solidarity, benevolence in the sense of *ren* in Chinese, collective welfare and facilities, and shared individual human rights.

[Public good and common good]
Common good underpins a collaborative democratic approach to the social engagement of higher education. Unlike public goods it implies equity, including access and affordability. Equality of respect, and rights of diversity, are also essential. Different common goods together constitute the combined common good. It overlaps with some meanings of 'public' and 'public good', but not all. It refers to a condition of universal beneficence, it includes all citizens, but is not limited to the state sector - civil society and market agents contribute to common goods - and it is not defined by the Samuelson dualism.

[Mazzucato's comment on the limitations of each concept]
This is not to say 'common good' solves all conceptual problems. Mariana Mazzucato notes that while *public good* is top-down and oriented to private market interest not collective interest, and limits the role of the state to market failure and externalities, *common good* is too confined to the local level and presupposes not just market failure but state failure. It 'places the burden for compensating for weak states on communities'. What is needed is active and positive government that also 'promotes and nurtures co-creation and participation'. This suggests a form of common good in higher education that *combines* top-down and bottom up action, underpinned by collective responsibility, with participation both inside and outside the institutions.

[Two extensions of the common good idea]
We need to extend the public and common good ideas in two ways. First, Rita Locatelli argues that when non-state agents make contributions to the common good, the state should ensure that private capture is prevented and equity is maintained. This role of the state can be described as provision of 'public common goods'. Second, Mazzucato suggests

a social and political concept of value, which she calls 'public value', based on ongoing negotiations between participants, to guide to decision making in education and elsewhere.

[Global public and common good]

Finally, we come to the global public and common good, the most difficult part of our project. The Climate Nature Emergency compels us to find a pathway to the global good. But except in China and Japan, and to an extent Chile, the interviewees were not sharp on the global. The limitation is methodological nationalism, the belief that national state and society are the natural form of the world, and the global is both external to the nation and determined by it.

The fact there is no global state strictly negates the possibility of *global public* goods, if public good implies the state. The definition of global public goods currently in use, developed by the UNDP, models them as externalities generated by nation-states, without collective welfare or beneficence. It is more useful to work with ideas of *global common* good and goods that rest on shared agendas and collaborative relations, and include not just the central agencies of states but universities and non-government actors.

Higher education has much potential for global common goods. It is powered by knowledge which flows too freely to be contained by nation-states. It has a community of interest with colleagues abroad, and a long record of peaceful cooperation. It constitutes a worldwide space of free inquiry sustained by joined-up practices of academic freedom in independent-minded universities. It can foster all-important inter-civilisational dialogues in a multi-polar world. There are limits to the extent that universities can pursue the global common good alongside the capitalist economy but those limits have not been reached.

The worry is the fragility of the machinery for pursuing the global common good. Bottom-up cooperation across borders is not enough. In the last thirty years global science and university partnerships have grown rapidly but as the US China Initiative has shown, and also Putin's isolation of the universities in Russia, bottom-up networks can be quickly snuffed out by coercive states.

[Tianxia: a worldwide perspective]

To pursue the global common good effectively we need more robust discursive practices of global relations. The national studies suggest that global thinking is more developed in China than elsewhere. Sinic tradition includes tianxia, a world without borders based on unity-in-diversity, held together by shared rituals and ethical values rather than by coercion. Tianxia weigong refers to common goods that benefit all and require contributions from all parties.

[The global and the planetary]

Of course the climate nature emergency will soon force the world scale on us whether nations like it or not. Beyond the *global* common good, the horizon of our research, there are *planetary* relations, the world as an inter-dependent system including humans, technology and nature. This perspective decentres the human and brings new responsibilities to human society, higher education and research. In the national studies the main contribution of higher education to global common good mentioned by interviewees was the production and transfer of knowledge, including cooperation on climate change.

[Concluding remarks]
The world changes rapidly, civilisations rise and fall and eco-systems collapse. The agendas of self-serving universities and solipsistic nations are not large enough for the times. I suspect that unless higher education can effectively address the public and common good it will eventually become decoupled from societies and states. However, amid nativist nations and the devastating fallout from geo-political claims to mastery, it is difficult to focus on the public and common good in higher education, especially the global common good.

So I finish with more questions than answers. How can the world be weaned off capital accumulation as the measure of value, which is destroying our conditions of existence, and how can neoliberal states be weaned off an economics-only reading of education? How can we establish forums in which to negotiate Mazzucato's public value, and how do we resolve diverse claims about common goods in our sector? How do nations advance on top-down coordination and bottom-up cooperation at the same time, and what can universities do to foster each? Will we in this room continue to tolerate the assumption that Western universities have superior claims to understanding the common good? How do we bring multiple voices to the table?

[Thank you for your attention*/fern*]
This my final major speech as director of CGHE has sought to distil eight years of learning. Sincere thanks to Aline Courtois, Lili Yang and Elisa Brewis, the capable postdocs attached to the project. Aline and Lili have gone on to fine careers in ongoing academic posts and we trust Elisa will do the same.

Thank you for your attention and I hope you have a great conference!