

The public good and higher education in Poland

Krystian Szadkowski^{a*}

^a Faculty of Philosophy, Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznań, Poland

ul. Szamarzewskiego 89, 60-568 Poznań, Poland *krysszad@amu.edu.pl

This is accepted version of the article that has been published in *Compare: A Journal of Comparative and International Education*. See:

<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/03057925.2021.1987194>

To cite: Szadkowski, K. (2021). The public good and higher education in Poland. *Compare: A Journal of Comparative and International Education*. DOI: 10.1080/03057925.2021.1987194

For accessing the final version either go to the publisher's website or contact the author.

This paper contributes to the debate on the varieties of national manifestations of the public good(s) in higher education. Drawing on a set of 33 semi-structured interviews (with politicians, university managers and faculty), it addresses the three following research questions: How do the actors in the field define the public good(s)? To what extent does the global public good play a role in their views? What are the specificities of the national system that shape understandings of the public dimension of higher education in Poland? The three definitions of the public good are proposed. The findings are discussed alongside the following four themes: higher education as a public good, higher education and the state, tuition fees, and the global public good.

Keywords: public good, global public good, Poland, tuition fees

Introduction

The public good re-orientation has long been understood as desirable solution to the crisis affecting higher education (Newfield 2016). However, its seemingly universal character has been insufficiently researched under various national conditions. The concept of the public good historically emerged from the Western tradition; thus, it can hardly be translated into political imaginaries and epistemologies of the East or the South (Marginson and Yang 2020; Fongwa 2019). But even within the Western realm, it manifests differently in various national systems of higher education, depending on their complex trajectories of development (Carpentier and Courtois 2020). Therefore, before treating the public good as a one-size-fits-all solution for the ills of higher education worldwide, we should ask the following questions: who, how and under which conditions is defining the public good in specific national systems? (Unterhalter et. al 2019).

We can distinguish between three dominant approaches to the public good prevalent in contemporary higher education research. The first is a normative perspective, wherein the public good (singular) tends to be interpreted as the ideal towards realisation of which practice within the sector should be oriented: a sum of non-individual benefits (Nixon 2011), social equality and social justice (Leibowitz 2012); a harmonious society, conducting, through higher education, a rational and critical dialogue (Calhoun 2006). The second is an economic approach. Discussions about the public contributions of higher education often start with examining the issue of the public goods (plural). This debate is underpinned by neoclassical economics, and Paul Samuelson's (1954) theory of pure public goods is its crucial point of reference. Thirdly, a political approach based on a general political concept of the public (Dewey 1927) has recently been reintroduced to higher education debates by Marginson (2016). It is an inherently historical and culturally impregnated concept. The public manifests itself when the will of the citizens is mediated through the state, its agendas and officials' actions. The public or private character of the action is based on the political decision of the public that would act upon it

through state agendas. Similarly, in higher education, it is based on political decision-making whether we frame the benefits from higher education as a public good that contributes to the whole society, or as a solely private benefit.

A look at debates on the public good in higher education suggests that the concept of the public good is employed with minimal sensitivity to nationally determined aspects of the public/private dynamic. Moreover, despite growing interest and emerging broad research agendas, we still know relatively little regarding the contribution of higher education to the public good beyond the Anglo-American political and economic context.

This paper fills into that gap through a qualitative study of the higher education system in Poland. It will add to the growing body of literature concerning empirical studies on the national and cultural specificities of the understanding of the public dimension of higher education (Marginson 2016, 2017; Marginson and Yang 2020; Tian and Liu 2019; Fongwa 2018; Carpentier and Courtois 2020; Unterhalter et. al. 2019; Yang 2017; Simbürger and Guzman-Velenzuela 2019; Huang and Horiuchi 2020). By doing so, the research reported in this paper addresses both the conditions allowing for the adaptation of the concept of the public good to the national higher education context, as well as its potential maladjustments and existing alternatives.

Similar problems were raised in the most recent literature on the topic. Carpentier and Courtois (2020) have lately demonstrated the lasting but severely undermined importance of the French republican tradition and the concept of higher education as a public service for the sector in France. In the context of the recent Chilean reforms of the higher education system, the public role of private institutions was discussed (Simbürger and Guzman-Velenzuela 2019) and further contrasted with the data on the determining role of the institutional context and the sector of employment (public or private) in shaping the perceptions of higher education as a public good (Guzman-Velenzuela, Barnett and Labraña 2019). Fongwa (2019) has recently

described the porosity of the public/private dichotomy in the context of acquiring individualised higher education credentials in South Africa, uncovering a broader set of relations in play, i.e., the phenomenon of the *black tax*, which ties the prospective student with their family. Furthermore, in their recent study, Tian and Liu (2019) remarked that the concept of the common good (UNESCO 2015) may be interpreted as applying more to Chinese higher education, as it ‘implies that all humans live in the same planet and they shoulder the same responsibility to make their lives better’ (Tian and Liu 2019, 638).

While the groups of research mentioned above proposed that ideas translated to the ground level of practices in higher education may become hybridised, the vectors of this hybridisation are different in different cases. On the one hand, French and Chilean cases emphasised the internal hybridity of the public/private dichotomy, which became the most striking in the case of the experience of observing the state as a powerful driver of the marketisation of higher education. On the other hand, the case of China exposed the maladjustment of the liberal Western tradition to the Sinic and Neo-Confucian narratives that underpin the understanding of the mutual relationships between the state and higher education (Yang 2017), as well as with its broader global environment (Tian and Liu 2019). More light has been recently shed on the problem by Marginson and Yang (2020), who compared the two broad traditions, namely liberal Anglo-Saxon and Sinic, in search of a conceptual common ground. The case discussed by Fongwa (2019) stands at the threshold between the hybridisation and the cultural maladjustment, as he presents the public benefits induced by private acquisitions of higher education credentials, while offering a different, culturally embedded, epistemological perspective rooted in the philosophy of *Ubuntu*, which is able to grasp the relational, non-binary (public/private) realm of human interactions.

The paper contributes to a debate on the varieties of national manifestations of the public good(s) in higher education. It emerges from a large international comparative research project including 10 national cases. It provides answers to the three following research questions:

- A. How do the actors in the field define the public good(s)?
- B. To what extent does the global public good play a role in their perspective?
- C. What are the specificities of the national system that shape understandings of the public dimension of higher education in Poland?

Thus, the research questions specifically target the questions of ‘how’ and ‘under what conditions’ the public good is defined by the main actors in the national field of higher education (Unterhalter et. al 2019). They broaden this scope further by addressing the pressing issue of the global public good in higher education as seen from within the Polish higher education system.

Poland constitutes an important case study that contributes to a comprehensive and inclusive understanding of the interplay between the public good and national higher education. Few studies have been conducted to date in non-Anglo-Saxon countries (Tian and Liu 2019; Fongwa 2018; Carpentier and Courtois 2020; Unterhalter et. al. 2019; Simbürger and Guzman-Velenzuela 2019; Huang and Horiuchi 2020), and even fewer in post-socialist countries (Marginson 2017). The Polish case could enrich the current understanding of the national specificities, as it is a post-socialist country that is at the same time not a post-Soviet system (like Russia studied by Marginson). Poland stands out from the other European (including Eastern European) systems due to its traditional, strongly articulated self-governing academic community and general, traditional distrust towards the institution of the state, partially a result of the experience of real socialism (Dobbins 2011).

Following this introduction, basic information on the context of the development of higher education in Poland are provided. The methods and data used in the study are then

explained. The results section addresses research questions A and B by introducing three definitions of the public good(s) and the presentation of the selected four themes. The paper concludes with a discussion of national specificities of the articulation of the public good in Polish higher education; this section addresses question C. The article ends with conclusions.

Higher education in Poland

The post-1989 transformation of higher education in Poland provides the backdrop to the discussion of ‘public good(s)’ presented later in this article. In the context of massification of the system, the public good in Poland encompasses three different forces: the re-appearing state, the strong and autonomous academic community, and the vanishing market and private sector. Its dominant tendency was the rapid universalisation of access to higher education. The number of students enrolled in the system increased from 403,824 students in 1990 to 1,953,832 students during the peak of enrolments in 2006; it then progressively fell to only 1,230,254 in 2018, as a result of a general demographic decline (Kwiek and Szadkowski 2018). The general trend was accompanied by the three most significant developments that shaped the sector.

First, during the expansion period, the role of the state in the sector was limited. Higher education was regarded as the sector of marginal economic importance during the entire post-1989 transformation. This was manifested in low levels of funding for both higher education and science sectors. Despite that free tuition in public institutions was and is guaranteed by the Polish Constitution from 1997, the supplemental private contributions were needed and allowed during the peak of the massification. Moreover, to achieve the rapid and smooth increase in student enrolments, the sector was left on its own, and the academic community was granted a substantial level of autonomy (Kwiek 2014). This gradually resulted in Poland becoming one of the most nationally collegial (that is, nationally steered by the academic community) systems in Europe (Dobbins 2011). The academic faculty in Poland retain an essential say in terms of its enterprise, both at the institutional and at the system-wide level. Active academics are

involved in all vital decision-making processes in the system: from holding the posts of vice ministries to becoming the directors and councils of all the governmental agencies responsible for the distribution of funds for research and internationalisation-related activities. They play an active role in shaping the contours of the reforms and in consulting the government proposals (Antonowicz, Kulczycki and Budzanowska 2020). They also form disciplinary committees responsible for shaping the developments of their disciplines or adapting the national standards to their needs. A consequence of the academic community control over the sector is the fact that the dominant vision of education as a means for successful access to the labour market is counterbalanced with a socially embedded and widely accepted vision of education as *Bildung* (Shaw 2019).

Second, the uncontrolled expansion of the sector led to the imbalanced development of the academic disciplines (Kwiek 2013). The humanities and social sciences transitioned towards a teaching-oriented mode of generating revenue from fee-based teaching, thereby deinstitutionalising their research capacities (Kwiek 2014). However, a recent reversed demographic trend contributed to de-privatisation, a rapid process of depleting the public institutions of private, fee-based sources of revenues combined with a gradual shrinking of the demand-driven private sector (Kwiek and Szadkowski 2018). The disappearance of the substantial share of revenues from the budgets of public institutions was even more severe as there are few potential sources on which the sector may rely. For example, research funding, both basic and applied, comes mainly from the government. The contributions of the private sector are nearly non-existent, since due to the years of deindustrialisation, the capacity of the economic environment to pursue frontline innovation and research is low.

Third, as a response to the vulnerabilities of the massively teaching-oriented and self-steered system, the two waves of reforms were designed and enacted. First, Kudrycka's reforms were implemented from 2008 to 2012, and more recently, so-called Law 2.0 was prepared and

consulted between 2016 and 2018 and then in the stage of implementation from 2018 onwards. These two waves of reforms aimed at the re-engagement of the state as an active actor within the higher education system that strives to reshape it in line with a more instrumental view (Kwiek 2014). This effort created tension between the demands for public accountability and academic independence (Shaw 2019). However, it was partly handled by the (unprecedented in recent Polish history) large, participatory model of consultation and bottom-up construction of the reforms used by the government during the recent design and implementation of the so-called Law 2.0 (Antonowicz, Budzanowska and Kulczycki 2020). The reforms addressed the existing but less tangible hierarchies between institutions (public vs private and metropolitan vs regional) and attempted to fill the vacuum of non-existing national policy for the creation and stimulation of the development of world-class universities. However, introducing formalised hierarchy into the system has been met with hostility on the part of the academic community. It was presented as aiming at producing winners and losers.

Research Methodology

Participants

This research is part of a broader international comparative project on local and global public goods and the public good led by Centre for Global Higher Education. It uses in its design the templates delivered for the national case study teams. It uses the standardised guideline for the semi-structured interview, and it aims at providing a similar sample. The three different categories of participants were recruited: government and national collegial bodies, management of the two selected universities and their departments, and academics in three contrasting disciplines (history, economics, IT or automatics). Overall, a total of 33 participants were interviewed in the Polish study.

The sample included two public universities: one research-intensive university located in a large city (“metropolitan university”) and one deeply embedded in its region, located in a smaller town (“regional university”).

The interviews at the ministerial and national collegial level involved vice ministers, directors of particular departments, and representatives of various national collegial bodies¹. All interviewees spoke in a personal capacity.

Block quotes from the interviews are referenced with the categorial codes assigned by the researcher during the analysis. For example, representative of a national collegial body is quoted as “National Collegial Body, PAC 3”, where “PAC” stands for the acronym of the organisation and the number indicate the number of the interview in this category. Similar codes were assigned to representatives of the Ministry, while GOV stands for the upper ministerial level, GOV-D represents the interview with the ministerial official of the departmental level.

Data collection

Purposive sampling was used to recruit participants for the present study from the governmental and collegial agencies level (n=15), as well as the managers of the selected universities and their departments (n=6). Random sampling was used for the selection of academics from the three contrasting disciplines (history, economics and IT or automatics) (n=12).

All the interviews were undertaken between the 6th of June 2018 and the 3rd of February 2020. While most of the interviews were conducted in 2018, single interviews were completed successively throughout the next year due to the constraints in reaching out to suitable interviewees.

Interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed. The standard interview lasted about 45 minutes.

Data analysis

¹ Representatives of the following collegial bodies were interviewed: Committee for Evaluation of Scientific Units (CESU), Polish Accreditation Committee (PAC), Committee of Science Policy (CSP), National Council of Science and Higher Education (NCSHE), and Conference of Rectors of Academic Schools of Poland (CRASP).

First, the transcribed interviews were read by the researcher, and summary conceptual memos were produced for each of the items. These memos were used for mapping the tensions that appear within a single interview utterance, for example – emphasising a weak role of the state in the sector and demanding high public subsidies. The interview data was then categorised and uploaded to MaxQDA 12. Two cycles of coding were completed. First, the interviews were coded holistically, meaning that larger portions of interviews were marked along with the inductively emerging sets of categories, e.g., the public good; the common good; the role of the state; commercialisation; fees, in order to prepare them for further, more detailed coding and to establish a broad picture of topics and their sequences in each of the interviews (Saladana 2013). Categories were color-coded. Subsequently, the document portraits were produced for each item, and the initial patterns were identified, for example, existence of parallel discourses on the public and the common good, as well as their hybridisation in some of the interviews. Values, attitudes and beliefs which were evident in the transcripts were coded.

In terms of securing the validity of the results, various procedures were conducted during and following the analysis (Miles and Huberman 1994). For the sake of confirmability, quotes were only used and displayed in the article if they were salient and reflecting multiple positions adopted by the representative of a given category (e.g., ministerial, institutional or disciplinary). This has been achieved by both, checking the prevalence of a given position, as expressed by numeric presence of specific codes, in the interview material, as well as by checking whether selected quote reflects the core elements of the given code/phenomenon as grasped in its description prepared by the researcher.

To ensure internal validity, negative cases and rival explanations were sought (Antin et al. 2015). For example, while fragments of the interviews expressing the economic notion of the public goods were easily identifiable in the material, the efforts were made to describe other discursive strategies. Summary grids and cross-tables comparisons were used to expose various

non-idiosyncratic ideas, echoed in more than one interview, present in the material. This resulted, for example, in identification of the three definitions of the public good presented below. Through this procedure a rival explanation of the system dynamic was found – one that could be anchored in the common good. No matter that variety of definitions of the common good were identified, for the sake of maintaining the focus this article reports only the findings on the public good. Finally, to secure external validity, the findings were judged based on coherence with existing theory and research. This has been achieved through, on the one hand, extended literature review on the topic, presentations and the discussion of the results during the project seminars and meetings, as well as in the direct discussion with the project leader on the other, allowed for identification of themes where national specificities might be graspable, yet communicable.

Ethical considerations

Participants were informed of the purpose of the research and of the ways in which the data would be used. The consent form clarified how anonymity and confidentiality would be protected throughout this project. The participants were given the option to resign from protecting their anonymity, and all of the representatives of the ministerial and national collegial bodies did.

Results

The task of this section is to address research questions A and B. It does this by first presenting the three definitions constructed on the basis of the interview material and then discussing the general understanding of the relationship between the state and higher education among the participants; finally, it addresses their further exploration in relation to the three significant themes for understanding the public good in the context of Polish higher education.

Part A: The public good – the three definitions

Each interview opened with the general questions about the aims and missions of either the system or the given university. It was intended to develop the general picture that could be

further explored with the questions concerning the understanding of the public role or the public good in relation to the system. During the analysis of the coded segments for the concept of the public good in particular fragments of the interviews with the representatives of government and the national collegial bodies, short summaries were produced and further compared along the summary grid. Based on the analysis, a descriptive list of features of the general definition of the concept in a given interview was produced and further abstracted into three different definitions containing the general indicated features.

Public good as a managed resource

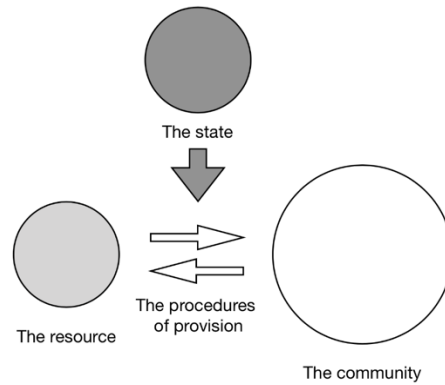
One of the definitions present in the analysed corpus, particularly among those with a disciplinary background in economics, was a classical Samuelson-inspired definition of the pure public good. This was defined as follows by one of the participants:

something that serves everyone and its consumption does not deplete the resource
(National Collegial Body, PAC 3);

or another:

something that leads towards the distribution of a given benefit without assuming the maximisation of the individual benefit at the cost of everybody else (National Collegial Body, NCSHE 1)

It could be either a material or immaterial good, or service, and it may be an object of concern of the government and state authorities; thus, they are expected to provide the resources for its further provision and reproduction, as well as set the rules for the assessment of whether the provision is successful and satisfactory. The public good(s) in this perspective should serve the community from a long-term, broad, non-individualistic perspective. Such a relational construction could be presented schematically, as illustrated in **Figure 1**. below.



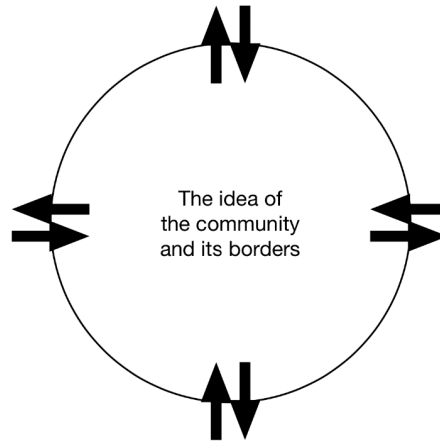
This consists of the resource, the community (national, regional or citizenship-based), and finally, a set of procedures of provision established usually by the state. The resource, the state, and the procedures are understood as something external to the community itself – in most cases being higher education.

The public good as a regulatory idea

The other definition present in the interviews, amongst some of the representatives of the ministry, involves considering the public good as a regulatory idea of the given community or the state itself. This broad political conception presumes that a given community and its long-term functioning, also in the state-form, is a good and regulatory point of reference of either state authorities' actions or the actors within the community. An apt illustration was provided by the director of one of the ministerial departments:

Some principia, that need to unite us all and the interest of the state, and the citizens, that are more important than my interest and my personal benefits (Director of the Ministerial Department, GOV-D 1).

Its relational structure could be presented as the following (**Figure 2**):



No matter how static the figure above may appear at first sight, what is dynamic in this picture is the fluidity of the boundaries of the community, symbolised above by the arrows, whether it is the state, the nation, the citizenship-based community, or humanity. The public good in this version is the idea that secures the community's integrity, maintenance, and long-term prospects and successful reproduction. The definition of the public good in such instances serves as a point of reference for thinking about the procedures of inclusion, who may be incorporated into the community, and therefore, who may benefit from its regular functioning.

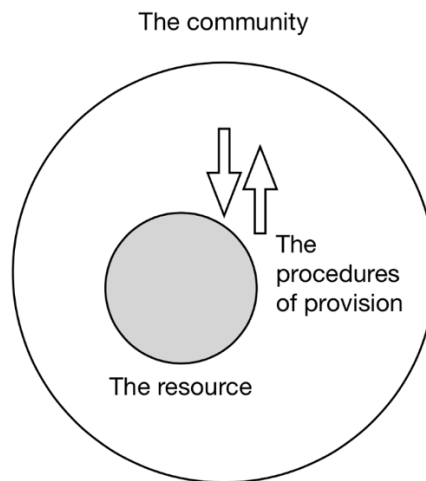
Public good as a foundational resource of a given community (local, national, global)

Finally, the third definition of the public good present in the interviews is the combination of the political and economic vision of the public good, or understanding it as something fundamental for the functioning of the given community and managed internally by it. Such resources may be an essential aspect of the very community itself. It is also involved in the processes of defining the procedures of its management. This line of thinking is illustrated by the following quote from the interview with one of the ministerial officials:

A public good is a good that comes or is produced with the participation of the whole or the majority of social resources, and (...) processed and redistributed by an institution for the good of the whole community (Director of the Ministerial Department, GOV-D

3)

Such a relational structure is presented below schematically in **Figure 3**:



This form of thinking about the public good shifts the attention to within the community. The state may or may not precedes provision of the resources to the community; thus, it does not intervene in setting and defining the internal procedures.

These three different accounts of the public good present in the interview material can be treated as snapshots taken from different positions. In other words, they are views provided from different angle of what discursively is used as a single and coherent definition, rather than being separate and stable conceptions of the public good. They are interrelated and expose some of the core elements of the notion in question. Moreover, they may be found in different arrangements within a single interview and are in interplay along with the analysed themes.

Part B: The relationship between higher education and the state

The role of the state and its agencies, and the ministry as one of the most tangible emanations of the state within the system, is perceived as limited, and the interviewees were convinced that this is a preferable situation. A common agreement could be found in the material on the bureaucratic overregulation experienced by the system and its institutions in the last few decades. One of the interviewees from the ministry expressed the following regarding the period of the policy of no policy:

The state was withdrawn from the realisation of the strategic aims, and at the same time was over-present and pushed strongly in the areas where it should not be present (Vice-minister, GOV 1).

The state is about to come back to the system, in result of the reforms that started in 2016.

There are two general competing views present in the material. One is an opinion that dominates amongst the interviewed government representatives but can also be found in some of other interviews, namely that state should actively play the role of setting strategic goals, evaluating the institutions from a distance and granting them full institutional autonomy. The logic of the functioning of the Polish state in the sphere of evaluation was described by one of the interviewees, a vice-minister, as follows:

We are not interested (...) in the way the higher education institution is internally organised – we expand the organisational autonomy of the institutions. We leave aside all these purely quantitative indicators (...). We look at the achievements in the macroscale. We assess the effects, not the ways they were achieved. (...) We assume that the autonomous universities and self-governance of the academic community will manage (Vice-minister, GOV 1).

Conversely, there is a view that connects all the types of interviewees, from the ministry to representatives of national collegial bodies to the senior managers at the university level, namely that the state should be merely a provider of public funding that leaves the rest in the hands of the academic community. The following was declared by one of the vice-ministers, who was open about favouring a minimal role of the state:

The role of the government is to care that there will be enough money, or at least, as much as possible. (ex-Vice-minister, GOV 2).

This aligns with the following statement of a senior manager from one of the universities:

The government needs to provide us with the resources necessary to fulfil our missions and to indicates some goals to be achieved. Yet, we do not necessarily have to accept the missions, but we cannot completely ignore them either. (Regional University - Management 1)

This view, pervasive in the interview material, assumes the reception of the public funding with no necessary state interference.

Again, the interviewed faculty rarely addressed fully the question concerning the role of the state, typically admitting that they seldom think about such an abstract issue. One of the interviewees described this abstractness of the state responsibilities in the following terms:

Personally, I do not see any special responsibility of the Department to the state. Frankly, I can see much bigger responsibility that the Department has to the whole humanity (Metropolitan University – Professor – Economics 1)

This fragment directs us to the discussion about the contribution of the studied department to the global public good, which will be addressed separately in a subsection below (Part D).

Part C: Higher education as a public good

The most tangible and vital theme related with the public good for the interviewees was the higher education itself, contributing indirectly to social well-being from a long-term, generational perspective. This general view was replicated along with all the categories of the interviewees:

the more we will educate good graduates, and they will enter the labour market, it may bring a benefit to all (Metropolitan University – Junior Faculty – History 2).

Moreover, the role of higher education and students' formation was regarded as foundational for society's sustainable reproduction as an integrated community of citizens, nationals or cosmopolitans. Views regarding the public good function of universities differed according to

the wider beliefs of the interviewees, and the emphasis was placed either more on national or on international integration. Two contrasting fragments below illustrate this tension. The first is from one of the interviewed vice-ministers, who constructed his discourse on the public good and carefully distinguished it from a more instrumental and economic view:

Teaching and creation of a certain citizen and patriotic attitudes. It is here where the public good is to be found. No matter that not everything here can be directly counted, materially speaking, nonetheless, I think that here we have the public goods serviced or even produced by the universities (Vice-minister, GOV 3).

Even if, conceptually, the normative and political level are merged with the economic perspective that forces the interviewee to speak using the language of ‘production’, the emphasis is placed here on the contribution of higher education to the process of demarcating the borders of citizenship-based or nationality-based community.

The reversed competing logic present in the interviews is depicted in the fragment below, which is derived from the interview with the representative of the management of one of the universities:

We are responsible for building up the relational capital. I mean, building up social attitudes of people, who will live here. No matter of their culture or the colour of their skin. That is the core responsibility of the universities. We see it as an added value, and it should be seen as added value by the society that funds us. (Regional University - Management 1)

While the public good language is filled with the economic discourse on ‘relational capital’ and ‘added value’, the underlying narrative refers to the universities contributing to the more diversified and inclusive integration.

Finally, an essential context for constructing higher education’s role as a public good has been the negative consequences of spontaneous, uncontrolled and market-driven

massification. Commenting on the recently introduced quota for the student/staff ratio used in the public funding algorithm formula, an interviewed vice-minister shed light on the understanding of the public good; his statement may seem paradoxical at first sight:

Universities have not been able to meet the education of such a number of students at this level anyway. Furthermore, this is somewhat a struggle between this public 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 realise this public good understood as the elite good. (Vice-minister, GOV 1)

Part D: The global public good and higher education

The global public good outcomes of the Polish higher education system were apparent dominantly through the prism of its three-pillar missions (Shaw 2019): research, teaching and service to society and economy. In the first area, the global public good contribution was predominantly seen as the production of knowledge i.e. in the forms of internationally visible publications - indexed journal articles, openly accessible and with the potential to impact global science. The other two spheres were regarded as less articulated areas of activities of the Polish universities. They include, for example, education of global citizens and essential contributions to the technological breakthroughs with a global reach. However, the interviewees mentioned the growing barriers in all three areas of contributions to the global public good that inhibit its full development. These include commercial publishers' interests, brain drain, and patenting. These were regarded as natural sources of tensions.

The issue of the climate crisis was seen as the growing source of the material imperative to adopt a more global perspective with regards to the public good by the system, the institutions and the individual academics. The following was bluntly expressed by one of the representatives of national collegial bodies:

The problems with climate... they at once unable the public good to be seen as some sort of the interest or a good at the level of Poland, or even Europe, but to require us to think about it in actual global terms. Otherwise, if we will continue to think in these national or European terms, we will enter a dead end - as a species, we will go extinct in less than a century. (National Collegial Body, PAC 3)

Thus, the global public good to which higher education should contribute, in the three areas mentioned above, can be interpreted as the good of interrelated humanity, linked together across national borders and inhabiting a single planet.

Nonetheless, it is vital to contrast such a perspective with the recurring themes from the interviews with the ministerial officials, wherein the emphasis was placed on the fact that the global public good was not a point of reference in the most recent wave of reforms of the systems. The ministry deemed it necessary for its development, but in terms of the side effect rather than the primary desirable outcome. This line of reasoning is well summarised in the following quote taken from the interview with a high-ranked official at the Ministry of Science and Higher Education:

I think that it was not an initial guideline, that we aimed to reform the system in order to contribute to the global progress. It is a side effect of the process. The priority is to contribute to the country's good. That's what important. We know that it would be impossible without participating in global competition. For this reason, the contribution to global good is not a problem. On the contrary, we see it as an essential aspect because it promotes our country, promotes the technical thought, allows us to attract the investors and research team to our country from abroad. (Vice-minister, GOV 1)

The tension between the national public good and the global public good here is evident.

The interviewees were well aware of the general global geopolitical issues that impact the relationships between the countries, as well as the position of Polish higher education within

this global landscape. The division between the centres, semi-peripheries and peripheries in knowledge production was mentioned and used for the articulation of the potential and existing obstacles to equal access to the globally produced public goods (the role of the commercial publishers, the brain drain processes, and the patenting and competition between the nation-states). However, the contribution to the global public good was perceived as a necessary component of the modernisation of the country and its science and higher education system. Such a project must go hand in hand with the operation of the political mechanisms to mitigate the adverse effects of contemporary global social and economic processes. Therefore, it needs to benefit the country, to maintain the public trust in science and the higher education system. It needs to create good working and living conditions in the country, so as to prevent the brain drain.

Part E: The public good and tuition fees

The Polish system of student finance is characterised by low subsidies, no tuition fees in the dominant public HEIs for full-time studies, and low tuition fees in the private HEIs (EURYDICE 2020). The number of fee-paying students in the public sector peaked in 2006, amounting to 497,000; it has been declining each year since, reaching only about 188,000 in 2018 due to the general decline in the national student population. Student support primarily consists of social scholarships, which are determined in relation to family income, and merit-based scholarships, which are allocated to less than 10% of students (Czarnecki et al. 2020). Typically, even receiving both does not suffice to cover the costs of living. Student loans and family tax benefits play a minor role in the system.

The universal tuition as opposed to free tuition for students was one of the issues addressed. The significant share of the interviewees expressed a clear stance against the universal tuition, seeing it as either unsuitable for the context of Polish higher education or as inconceivable. In the latter case, the interviewees indicated the constitutional limits that hinder

any introduction of the universal tuition in the system. The arguments developed against the tuition fees were based on the recognition of its role in tackling social inequalities:

Similarly like with the access to medical services, it seems that the decision on going in such prosocial direction and support all the citizens leads to much lower divisions or social abyss between people. (Metropolitan University – Professor – IT 2)

Conversely, the importance of free tuition in the processes of community creation, especially at the European Union level, as well as of the personal experience of benefiting from free public education, was often highlighted in the interviews.

Interestingly, the arguments in favour of the introduction of some forms of tuition referred directly to the public good. On the one hand, in the absence of the proper measure of the public benefits tuition-fees offer a means to charge for evident private benefits gained by the students, on the other, they were seen as a form of discipline that could allow students to value their studies more. On the top of that, they were perceived as either tackling the problem of ‘regressive redistribution’, meaning free tax-funded places dominantly going to the students from privileged backgrounds, or with the negative consequences of brain drain. It was emphasised that fees may be compensating for the costs of international mobility in the absence of the possibility to regulate the issue of costs shouldered at a global scale by the ‘global state’.

Recurring in the interviews was the proposal to introduce a financial mechanism that would charge the medical graduates for their education if they left the country right after finishing their studies. The reference echoed the proposal drafted at and promoted by the ministry between 2017 and 2018, which assumed that full fees for medical students should be introduced. However, this involved the system of stipends that would cover 100% of the costs, and the requirement that after graduation, one would have to work back in the country or pay back the full costs. This proposal was supposed to solve different problems at once. First, the

aim was to intervene in the urgent situation of a shortage of medical personnel². The second was to stop the brain drain process of Polish medics to more affluent countries in the EU³. The third was to maintain the formal constitutional warrant of free access to public higher education. However, it was met with a definitive opposition and was dropped by the ministry all together.

Nevertheless, the interviewees returned to the same idea and discussed it in light of the public good:

It is a problem, that a society, especially in the context of this public good, shoulders the costs of educating medical doctors, who afterwards do not realise the public or social goals for the society, that paid for their education. (...) I have the feeling that the regulations of this area would realise the public good. In contrast with, probably, the private good (Vice-minister, GOV 1).

This aspect become even more striking in the period of the global pandemic of COVID-19.

National specificities of the public good's articulation in Polish higher education

Four important national specificities with regards to the modes of understanding of the public dimension in higher education were exposed in the interview material (*What are the specificities of the national system and cultural tradition that shape understandings of the public dimension of higher education in Poland?*). The first is the importance of the negative consequences of market-driven, spontaneous and uncontrolled massification. Within the system highly impacted by the three decades of state withdrawal from a strategic role within the sector, the public good may be presented even as inducing the re-elitarisation of higher education. The

² According to the recent OECD data (2018) Poland has the smallest number of medical doctors per 1 000 inhabitants amongst 28 countries of the European Union (including, the UK). The rate of doctors per inhabitant in Poland is as little as 2,4, which locates it right after UK (2,9) and far from Germany (4,3). Source: OECD Health Statistics: Health care resources.

³ There are no precise data on the outflow of medical personnel from Poland to EU countries (and elsewhere), yet the government acted with the conviction as if that was a severe problem.

second is the relative weakness of the state in relation to higher education and a high level of autonomy and national collegial capacity of the academic community after 1990. While in the real socialism the state periodically has a strong presence in higher education (like during the short Stalinisation period until 1956 or in response to the “Solidarity” movement after 1984), it had been often contested and experience of real socialism contributed to deep distrust felt towards it until these days. The third is the centre-peripheral dynamic and its significance for the higher-education mediated modernisation project. The economic peripherality of Poland forms serious obstacles to the development of knowledge-driven economy and society. The fourth is the strong attachment to the constitutionally regulated free tuition within the public sector, which is an object of unsuccessful overrides to tackle the negative consequences of either brain drain (tuition fees/stipend mechanisms for medical doctors) and uncontrolled massification (fees as a form of discipline). Taking into account the crucial role of the political component in the process of determining the content of the concept of the public good in relation to higher education (Dewey 1927), we can observe that in a specific national setting, it may be translated into what may seem to be its opposite, as long as it protects the interest of a given community.

While the Polish higher education system shares many features of the Western European systems, unlike the French system (Carpentier and Courtois 2020), its specificities cannot be fully articulated through the modern binary of the public good and the private good; there is a clash between the state and civil society on the one hand, and the market forces on the other. Nonetheless, a strong articulation of the national and (to a lesser degree) institutional level of collegiality within the system (Shaw 2019), as well as the ethos of science as a global and horizontal plane of human activity (Bieliński and Tomczyńska 2018), might be considered the components that lay the foundation of the common good appeal within the Polish system, as seen in the interview material. However, the situation is not that of a cultural mismatch, as in

the case of higher education in China (Marginson and Yang 2020), where there is a separate tradition and vocabulary for explanations of the social/state vs higher education dynamic which has a better fit within the common good framework (Tian and Liu 2019, UNESCO 2015). Nonetheless, the narrative on the Polish higher education system through the common good prism deserves more attention and further research.

Conclusion

The main task of this article was to contribute to the ongoing discussion on the national specificities of understandings of the public good in relation to higher education. It has done so through a qualitative study which used Poland and its system as a case.

Three distinct definitions of ‘the public good’ emerged from interview data. While a classic economic conception, which treats the public good as a sum of managed resources, help us to understand the economic framing of higher education as the public good described in Part C, the other two allow to shed the light on other aspects of the specifically Polish dynamic. First, the distrust towards the state and the respect for academic autonomy contribute to the formation of the public good as something managed by a given community. Second, the different spatial variants (local, national, global) of the public good as a regulatory idea, something that defines the scale, the borders and the rules of inclusion into community, helps us to grasp the various tensions that emerged in the course of the analysis. One of the examples is the tension between the desire to protect the accessible and tuition-free public higher education, at the same time emphasizing the need to confront the brain drain processes that deplete the country’s medical doctors pool with introduction of some fee-like mechanisms. All in the name of the same public good.

The analysis of the findings from this national case study may help deepen our understanding of the general dynamic of the public/private dichotomy in higher education.

When the discursive practices in higher education are considered, their striking feature comes to the fore – complete hybridity of the discourses themselves, where the sharp delineation of the political and the economic seems to be out of the question. This result aligns with Marginson’s (2016) synthetic understanding of the political and the economic modes of existence of the public good in higher education, which regards them as an axis that opens a specific spectrum, rather than rigid and stable realities. Thus, in order to study discursive constructions of the public good in national higher education settings, one needs to embrace them in their material embeddedness and historical trajectories.

As Unterhalter et. al (2019) suggest, the public good needs to be approached through the prism of the questions: who is defining it, how and under which conditions. As a result, we can see that as a purely normative and political concept, the public good tends to operate as an ‘empty signifier’ (Laclau 1996; see. Szkudlarek 2007) which gains its meaning depending on the context and the particular political needs expressed in a given moment in history, as to present the particular interest in the form of the universal claim. Nonetheless, as such, it is a unique ideal-form that attracts the attention of various social actors. Therefore, the concept itself proves to be particularly useful as a lens through which one may investigate the complex, often conflictual, social relationships within both the national and broader geopolitical settings in which higher education systems operate and allows for unravelling of their national specificities. However, the public good concept fails to escape the limitations of the ‘methodological nationalism’ (Shahjahan and Kezar 2013) and ‘embedded statism’ (Dale 2005) in higher education research, as it is substantially immersed in state-related and political community vocabularies and realities. For this reason, while useful for understanding the national logic and specificities within the countries and cultures that use it as part of their political grammar, it can hardly be operationalised as a viable lens to investigate the global challenges that face current higher education systems worldwide. Thus, the encounter with the

limits of the public good vocabulary may open a path for a further exploration of what lays beyond it.

References

- Antin, T. M., Constantine, N. A., and Hunt, G. 2015. „Conflicting discourses in qualitative research: The search for divergent data within cases.” *Field Methods* 27 (3): 211-222.
- Antonowicz, D., Kulczycki E. and Budzanowska A. 2020. „Breaking the deadlock of mistrust? A participative model of the structural reforms of higher education system in Poland.” *Higher Education Quarterly*. doi: 10.1111/hequ.12254
- Bieliński, J. and Tomczyńska A. 2019. „The Ethos of Science in Contemporary Poland.” *Minerva* 57 (2): 151–173.
- Calhoun, C. 2006. “The University and the Public Good.” *Thesis Eleven* 84: 7-46.
- Carpentier, V. and Courtois, A. 2020. “Public good in French universities: principles and practice of the ‘republican’ model.” *Compare*. doi: 10.1080/03057925.2020.1722943
- Czarnecki, K., Korpi, T. and Nelson, K. 2020. “Student support and tuition fee systems in comparative perspective.” *Studies in Higher Education*. doi: 10.1080/03075079.2020.1716316
- Dale, R. 2005. “Globalisation, knowledge economy and comparative education.” *Comparative education* 41 (2): 117–149.
- Dewey, J. 1927. *The Public and its Problems*. Alon Swallow: Denver.
- Dobbins, M. 2009. *Higher education policies in Central and Eastern Europe: Convergence towards a common model?* Basingstoke: Palgrave.
- Fongwa, S. N. 2019. “Interrogating the public good versus private good dichotomy: ‘black tax’ as a higher education public good.” *Compare*. doi: 10.1080/03057925.2019.1651194
- Guzmán-Valenzuela, C., Barnett R. and Labraña J. 2019. “Consensus and dissensus: changing perceptions of the public dimension of universities in a marketised environment.”

- Journal of Higher Education Policy and Management*. doi:
10.1080/1360080X.2019.1658850
- Huang, F., and Horiuchi, K. 2020. "The public good and accepting inbound international students in Japan." *Higher Education* 79 (3): 459-475.
- Kwiek, M. 2013. "From system expansion to system contraction: Access to higher education in Poland." *Comparative Education Review* 57 (3): 553-576.
- Kwiek, M. 2014. "Structural changes in the Polish higher education system (1990–2010): A synthetic view." *European Journal of Higher Education* 4 (3): 266-280.
- Kwiek, M., and Szadkowski, K. 2018. "Higher education systems and institutions, Poland." *Encyclopedia of International Higher Education Systems and Institutions* 1–10. doi:
10.1007/978-94-017-9553-1_392-1
- Leibowitz, B. ed. 2012. *Higher Education for the Public Good. Views from the South*. Trentham Books: Sterling.
- Laclau, E. 1996. *Emancipation(s)*. London: Verso.
- Marginson, S. 2016. *Higher Education and the Common Good*. Melbourne: Melbourne University Publishing.
- Marginson, S. 2017. "The Public Good Created by Higher Education Institutions in Russia." *Voprosy obrazovaniya* 3: 8-36.
- Marginson, S. and Yang, L. 2020. "Public good and public goods in higher education: a comparison of Anglo-American and Sinic approaches." London: CGHE Working Paper.
- Miles, M. and Huberman, M. 1994. *Data Analysis*. Thousand Oaks: Sage.
- Newfield, Ch. 2016. *The Great Mistake: How We Wrecked Public Universities and How We Can Fix Them*. Johns Hopkins University Press: Baltimore.
- Nixon, J. 2011. *Higher Education and the Public Good: Imagining the University*. London: Continuum.

- Samuelson, P. 1954. "The pure theory of public expenditure." *Review of Economics and Statistics* 36: 386–389.
- Saladana, J. 2013. *The Coding Manual for Qualitative Researchers*. Thousand Oaks: Sage.
- Shahjahan, R. A., and Kezar, A. J. 2013. "Beyond the „national container” addressing methodological nationalism in higher education research." *Educational Researcher* 42 (1): 20–29.
- Shaw, A. M. 2019. "Public accountability versus academic independence: tensions of public higher education governance in Poland." *Studies in Higher Education* 44 (12): 2235-2248.
- Simbürger, E. and Guzmán-Valenzuela, C. 2019. "Framing educational policy discourse in neoliberal contexts: debates around the public university in a Chilean newspaper." *Journal of Higher Education Policy and Management*. doi: 10.1080/1360080X.2019.1687267
- Szkudlarek, T. 2007. "Empty signifiers, education and politics." *Studies in Philosophy and Education* 26 (3): 237-252.
- Tian, L. and Liu, N. 2019. "Rethinking higher education in China as a common good." *Higher Education* 77 (4): 623-40.
- UNESCO. 2015. *Rethinking Education: Towards a global common good?* Paris: UNESCO.
- Unterhalter, E., Allais, S., Howell, C. et. al. 2019. *Higher education, inequalities and the public good. Perspectives from four African countries*. London: CEID, UCL Research Report.
- Yang, L. 2017. 'The public role of higher learning in imperial China'. CGHE Working Paper London: CGHE.