



# The common in higher education: a conceptual approach

Krystian Szadkowski<sup>1</sup> 

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## Abstract

This article provides a map of the three-element conceptual set of the common (the common good, the commons, and the common) in reference to higher education. It does so using a method of political ontology. It discusses the three concepts in reference to the six dimensions of higher education reality (ontology, politics, ownership, governance, benefits, and finance). Thus, it not only presents a systematic view of higher education reality as seen through the lenses of the common but also explains the substantial (and in some cases, subtler) differences between the concepts themselves. Moreover, it addresses briefly the differences between the concepts from the order of the common and those from the order of the public. Finally, the article seeks to offer an insight into what this particular conceptual set may provide the researchers in terms of thinking through, and designing an alternative to the current predicament of higher education.

**Keywords** The common · The commons · The common good · Critical higher education research · Political ontology

## Introduction

This article provides a map of the three-part conceptual set of the common (the common good, the commons, and the common) in reference to higher education. In the context of the insufficiency of the modern public/private dichotomy, the proposed charting can serve as a tool for explaining the changes but also for providing a viable alternative to the ills of higher education. Thus, the article focuses on the actual, extant elements in modern higher education systems that function by the logic of the common, as well as on the horizon of future changes that could emerge from them. It does so through a contextualized study of actual uses of the concepts of the common in research on higher education to highlight some of its viable articulations. The context for this endeavor is provided by the recent shifts in higher education landscape.

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✉ Krystian Szadkowski  
krysszad@amu.edu.pl

<sup>1</sup> Center for Public Policy Studies, Adam Mickiewicz University, ul. Aleja Niepodległości 53, Poznań, Poland

The surrender of higher education and science to the market logic (Berman 2012), steering from a distance (Marginson 1997), the audit culture (Shore and Wright 2015), competition for status (Naidoo 2018), and privatization or the neoliberal reforms of the public sector (Olssen and Peters 2005) has led higher education researchers to announce the blurring or hybridization of the public/private dichotomy (Enders and Jongbloed 2007; UNESCO 2015; Guzman-Valenzuela 2016). Although some scholars point out that the boundaries between these higher education orders can still be clearly defined (Levy 2018; Kwiek 2016) and that we can even observe the ongoing processes of the de-privatization of higher education (Kwiek 2016), others have devoted significant effort to complicating this binary picture, attempting to combine a political and an economic approach to the public/private divide in order to construct a more nuanced analytical schema (Marginson 2016: 81–103). However, while such schemas provide a more detailed map of the given status quo of the sector, they are an unstable ground for the construction of a viable plan for change in higher education. In the end, such schemas trap our political imagination within an undialectical scenario where the only legitimized solution for the ills of the privatized and marketized environment of the competitive university is its re-publicization (Slaughter and Rhoades 2004: 56–57; Calhoun 2006; Newfield 2016).

The hybridization of the public and the private has been seen as symptomatic of the fact that the productive dialectic between these two orders has come to an end (Roggero 2011). The degree of their blurring is so high that it is difficult to discuss the possibility of bringing the things “back where they belong.” Not only is this evident in Anglosaxon systems such as that of the UK, Australia, or New Zealand, where the state has enforced a top-down neoliberalization, but is also encountered in places such as China, where a formally bureaucratic public system is consumed by the all-pervasive rule of competition and ongoing marketization. It is therefore hard to imagine that the cure for the ills of the public sector might come from its even greater marketization, as it has undoubtedly reached a limit, while it is also impossible to envisage the further intervention of the neoliberal state that would assume the reversion of the current trend (Jessop 2015). In other words, the contemporary state can function less and less as a solution to the problems arising from the shortcomings of market coordination. The neoliberal state is not only a guarantor of private property but also the leading actor in establishing, promoting, and maintaining the markets. In the case of present-day higher education, it is a challenge to pinpoint even one area where pure forms of state and public control prevail. The very idea of the public (or any socially related concept) has been under constant assault, at least since the 1970s (Marginson 2016: 84; Harvey 2007), and it is hard to imagine how exclusively public coordination could be any longer possible in societies structured around the needs of capital accumulation (Jessop 2015).

The ongoing blurring of the boundaries between the public and the private in higher education should be seen in the context of the emergence and global development of academic capitalism (Slaughter and Rhoades 2004; Münch 2014; Cantwell and Kauppinen 2014). Academic capitalism cuts diagonally public and private institutions not only by introducing an economic motive in the activities of academic staff and the institutions themselves (Kauppinen 2012), but also by using the dynamics of status distribution mechanisms to exacerbate competition between scientists, institutions and systems, making it a principle that organizes relationships in the public sector (Münch 2014; Slaughter and Taylor 2016). Although strictly capitalist (formally and actually focused on profit and value creation), the area in which the pure form of commodity production would dominate is just marginal in higher education (Marginson 2013). Yet, as Tilman Reitz (2017) has rightly demonstrated, the capitalist knowledge economy (and academic capitalism in particular) is forced to function as a

status economy, deploying prestige distribution mechanisms as a system of information about the economic value of knowledge (Szadkowski 2016) to enable profitable use even without the need to transform knowledge into a private product in a commodity form. The imposition of capitalist logic over the long-standing mechanisms of self-regulation of the academic community contributes to the gradual blurring of the public and the private in higher education.

In recent debates on the development of the capitalist knowledge economy, attention has centered on the growing importance of the commons and the common production (Ostrom 2009; Dardot and Laval 2014; Hardt and Negri 2009, 2017; De Angelis 2017; Rifkin 2014; Benkler 2011; Kostakis and Bauwens 2014). In general, the commons are social processes of production and reproduction of useful resources pooled together by a given community of commoners. Even if in the classical studies of Nobel laureate Elinor Ostrom (1990) common pool resources referred mainly to the management of tangible objects like water, forests or fishing pools that have to be secured from depletion, today's discussion on the commons has emphasized topics of knowledge production (Hess and Ostrom 2007) and presents a range of perspectives, from liberal to social democratic to radical (Broumas 2017). Notwithstanding, still little attention has been paid to the commons and the common within higher education research.

Whereas some scholars try to overcome the theoretical impasse caused by the insufficiency of public/private dichotomy by cautiously indicating the significance of the concept of the commons for higher education research (Roxa and Martensson 2014; Marginson 2016: 85), this approach is often overlooked. Nevertheless, the commons and the common are gaining increasing attention among scholars interested in exploring alternatives to neoliberal and competition-driven higher education (Roggero 2011; Neary and Winn 2012; Kamola and Meyerhoff 2009; Boehenke and Meyerhoff 2012; Pusey 2017). However, despite the growing recognition of the concept, there is still confusion regarding its constituent terms, as it is continuously referred to as: the common good (UNESCO 2015; Boyadjieva and Ilieva-Trichkova 2018), the common (Roggero 2011), the common public good (Marginson 2004b), common goods (Locatelli 2018), or the commons (Neary and Winn 2012). Another problem is that when used by researchers, usually it lacks a positive description and is preferably placed in the "non-non" sphere (non-market & non-state, see Marginson 2016: 95). This paper aims to clarify the various concepts from the order of the common in higher education, as well as to give them a more positive and tangible description.

To put it briefly, as a different mode of existence in higher education, the common is not only connected with the rule of self-regulation of actors of the system manifested in a collegial mode of coordination (Clark 1986), the "communist ethos" of science (Merton 1973) or self-organization of the disciplinary life (Becher and Trowler 2001). It also traverses the productive reality in higher education, as most of the outputs of higher education (both teaching and research processes) are initially produced for sharing (Marginson 2004a, 2004b), and the global production of open access knowledge is increasingly essential for the capitalist knowledge economy at large (Kostakis and Bauwens 2014). Finally, the common has to be addressed in its relation to the academic capitalism. The common is not just a transgression of the commodity form that is enforced nowadays on academic outputs (Eve 2015) but also goes beyond the status and hierarchies vital to its functioning (Hardt and Negri 2009). Thus understood, the order of the common is a condition that enables the functioning of academic capitalism as well as a foundation on which one can plan and build an alternative to it (Roggero 2010; Neary and Winn 2012). Hence, in the context of higher education, the common is a primary, non-hierarchical and self-determined social relation that binds the academic enterprise together, as well as a condition for its prosperous development and growth.

## Political ontology

Undertheoretization of the field of higher education research is a casual point of legitimate complaints (Slaughter 2001; Marginson and Rhoades 2002; Ashwin 2012). At the same time, higher education research is the resultant outcome of many disciplines, and higher education researchers use many borrowed concepts or theories which are then “filled” with content that pertains to the specificity of their research object. Concepts are the lenses through which the researcher construct and reveals reality. If epistemology frames what we are capable of knowing and methodology describes how we could tackle with reality to know, ontology deals with what (and in what way) we assume exists, that is it delimits the very object of knowing. There is no ontologically neutral higher education research. Ontology precedes epistemology and methodology. Ontological assumptions are rarely explicit; one cannot find a specific “Ontology” section just after every “Introduction.” However, such assumptions underpin the theoretical debates within the field—including the debate on the public/private dichotomy (and its limitations) as, arguably, the most significant of these discussions.

Political positions on higher education and related concrete activities are based on particular ontological decisions, and every ontology entails inevitable political consequences (Hay 2006). The taken-for-granted status of ontological decisions creates a problem with most of mainstream higher education research that shares the limits of Western liberal political ontology. The division into public and private lies at the heart of the political ontology of Western liberalism and poses a particular challenge to the political imagination and political action within the sector of higher education. Despite the proliferation of undoubtedly various cultural realizations of the public/private dichotomy in higher education (Marginson 2016, 82–84), the dichotomy itself is often hard to be operationalized in contexts beyond the Western imaginary, as in China (Yang 2017). As the subject of this article, ontologies based on the common, mobilized by some higher education researchers, are different in this respect. They go beyond the public/private dichotomy, not only at the discursive level but also in their material basis within the many past and present practices of teaching/learning and collective knowledge production. Thus, such ontologies offer a chance to avoid or overcome any perceived “methodological nationalism” (Shahjahan and Kezar 2013) grounded in particular (sometimes unintentional) ontological choices made by higher education researchers.

Bearing the above in mind, in what follows, I will focus on elucidating the concepts of the common good, the commons, the common, and their relations with the presence and the future of higher education. I discuss the three concepts in reference to the six dimensions of higher education reality (ontology, politics, ownership, governance, benefits and finance). I not only present a systematic view of higher education reality as seen through the lenses of the common but also present the substantial (and in some cases, subtler) differences between the concepts themselves. This section ends with a brief, further differentiation of the concepts of the order of the common from those of the public (the public good, the public goods, the public) which tend to be conflated by researchers. Moreover, the article seeks to offer insight into what this particular conceptual set may provide researchers in terms of thinking through, and designing, an alternative to the current predicament of higher education. In the concluding section, I discuss the relevance of the common as a perspective for further higher education research.

## The common good, the commons, and the common in higher education: a systematization

Part of the problem with the unclear use of the different concepts that interest us here stems from their application across the different dimensions of higher education reality, often conflated or mixed. Despite the fact that, at least since the work of Burton Clark (1986), the structure of the higher education system has been abstracted and presented in more general forms, the advent of globalization made apparent the inattention in the field to the interrelation between the local, the national and the global (Marginson and Rhoades 2002). It formed evident problems—and indeed some propositions were—rightly—accused of the reification of nation and state-centered methodologies (Dale 2005). To avoid replicating such errors, before I proceed to the presentation of the substantial differences between the concepts in question I will attempt a brief systematization of the layers of higher education that will be used in the ensuing analysis. The main aim of this procedure is to lay out the ground for an efficient and convincing differentiation between the particular set of concepts rather than offer a comprehensive and original systematization of higher education reality per se.

For this reason and building on earlier studies attempting a similar systematization within the analysis of the public/private axis in higher education (Calhoun 2006; Enders and Jongbloed 2007; Filippakou 2015), in the remaining part of this section, I propose to consider higher education in relation to (a) ontology, (b) politics, (c) ownership, (d) governance, (e) benefits, and (f) finance. Importantly, however, since they are intended to grasp and describe a reality that overflows national borders, the concepts associated with the order of the common find no easy fit within the modern dualisms of public and private and the nation-state and the market. In deploying these concepts, I will, therefore, be paying particular attention to their consequences for thinking *across* the local, national, and global levels of higher education—that is, for understanding their constant interaction.

### Ontology

Overall, the ontological dimension provides the answers to questions such as: what exists and how it exists? What could be seen as existing in higher education through the prism of specific ideas? To make a clear distinction between the three common-related concepts in question, we should start with the most fundamental ontological assumptions that they assume by inspecting what elements are emphasized and how they relate to each other.

The concept of the common good that comes from political philosophy (Deneulin and Townsend 2007) places the ontological emphasis on organic wholeness, an original relationship in which the actions regulated by specific normative ideals (solidarity, global cooperation, equality) are capable of stabilizing the harmonious relationship within the whole (e.g., given community, nation or humanity) and between its parts (e.g., particular actors). Higher education and science seen through this prism come under the efforts to articulate and secure a shared interest of humanity (Tian and Liu 2018). At national and global levels, the common good in higher education may serve as a signpost to direct the sector towards cooperation (against competition), solidarity (against selfishness), and equality (against hierarchy) (Marginson 2016) contributing to formation of a different set of standards for teaching students as citizens (also global citizens) or globally and nationally responsible participants of the given professions.

The economic concept of the commons (Ostrom 1990) moves us further towards a more materially understood reality of self-regulated relations between the subjects of given practices. It

encompasses the organization of relations within a fragment of the reality of production of goods or resources (material, such as drinking water; or immaterial, such as knowledge) undertaken at different scales (local, national or global) and organized and managed by the producers themselves (in a direct or representative form). Seen from this perspective, distributed but network-connected resources are administered by communities (indicatively, a global movement for open science) can be of assistance to the state (or transnational entities) and serve as a partner in the joint management, at different levels, of the sector of higher education (Eve 2015).

Finally, the ontological focus of the political-economic concept of the common is what we share and what influences the further potential for this sharing: the level of relations. Thus, it implies unmediated, immanent (direct), and self-determined (democratically organized) material associations among the subjects of practices (Hardt and Negri 2009). Those practices are not necessarily solely sector-limited. The ontological assumptions present here broaden the scope provided by the concept of the commons and gird a large set of productive horizontal practices. The common traverses reality. It is a material dimension that binds socio-economic actors together. Higher education, seen from this angle, flows beyond its institutional or system-wide form to embrace different grassroots educational and knowledge-production activities that take place beyond the market and the state (Kamola and Meyerhoff 2009; Roggero 2011; Pusey 2017).

## Politics

Ontological horizons implied by the three concepts relating to common dictate the shape of the sphere of politics within higher education, that is: Who determines what counts? What are the sides of conflicts around values in higher education? Who dominates these conflicts? A politics of higher education (present and future) as seen from the angle of each of the concepts is done on a differently structured arena.

In this context, the common good can be seen to presuppose the existence of an ethical community of people who come together to realize a common cause (Boni and Walker 2013), like for example, the expansion of the frontiers of knowledge of humanity based on the ethos of science (Merton 1973). It is assumed that such ethos, when shared, allows the relationships within the field to become less competitive and more consensual. Shared principles (including academic freedom, ideas of collegiality) and ethical stances enable people on a national and global scale to realize common goals in higher education (Finkin and Post 2009). Contributions to the global common good (volume of knowledge, global citizenship) based on trust, and horizontal cooperation can be observed in the case of World Class Universities that collaborate productively across borders and centre/periphery divisions (Marginson 2018).

The concept of the commons implies first and foremost the politics of—and specifically, against—knowledge enclosures (Hess and Ostrom 2007). Enclosures serve as an essential reference for the analysis of the changing landscape of global science and higher education (Bollier 2002; Peters 2009; Peekhaus 2012). As in eighteenth-century England, where the beginnings of capitalist production were bound with the deprivation of the masses' basic means of reproduction (access to land held in common), so, today, the competitive market relations installed within university walls contribute to the enclosure of the resource of knowledge, both in research and teaching-related contexts. The intellectual commons are permanently threatened by today's market-oriented higher education setting, with its promotion of intellectual property, knowledge transfers, and oligopolistic academic publishers. The commons (in their liberal interpretation presented here) are an equal partner with state/public

authorities in managing the higher education reality, while market entities are forces that drive enclosures (Peters 2009) and must be resisted or regulated.

The view of politics that is drawn by higher education researchers who refer to the concept of the common (Roggero 2011; Neary and Winn 2012; Pusey 2017) is rooted in its antagonistic relation to both the private and the public, the market (or capital) and the state, pictured as institutions that continuously transcend the realm of the social. Adopting this perspective gives a chance to conceptualize and outline an alternative to the university trapped in a vicious cycle between the order of public scrutiny and marketization, as well as to capitalism itself (Kamola and Meyerhoff 2009; Berardi and Ghelfi 2010; Roggero 2011; Pusey 2017).

## Ownership

Such an understanding of the ontological–political sphere of higher education provokes further, more concrete questions on the organization of the property relations within the common-based sector (existing or projected): Who owns what? Who controls higher education institutions? Who owns the products? How products circulate?

The political ontology implied by the concept of the common good suggests the assumption of a possible return to clear-cut ownership boundaries within the public and the private sectors (UNESCO 2015). Simultaneously, it allows us to project the redirection of the public sector towards the realization of the outputs that are owned by all, manifested in, *inter alia*, the production of knowledge as a global common good (Marginson 2016, 2018). From this point of view, like in the Chinese case study analyzed by Tian and Liu (2018), the public systems of higher education in the dominant countries are supposed to assume global (or even planetary) responsibilities for “the shared future for mankind” (2018: 20). That is, contributing to the development of publicly accessible results of frontier research and to an expansion of the global, public provision of higher education.

This ethical imperative recedes to the background in the context of the commons, which, in their liberal interpretation, forms merely a complementary model for (private and public) property relations in higher education (Peters 2009: 221). It is assumed that the free and open production of knowledge based on the commons could reinforce the existing order and improve the situation of higher education and science systems. The academic commons (Bollier 2002; Madison et al. 2009), owned and controlled by their producers and consumers, can—among other things—take the form of open-science movement (Eve 2015), the introduction of accessible infrastructural format for open-access journals such as Open Journal System, or, like in the case studied by Roxa and Martensson (2014), an organized way to manage and control the critical but intangible resource of academic prestige within institutions.

In contrast, the common in higher education is *not* a new kind of property (Hardt and Negri 2017: 97); it is instead viewed as a drive towards the conversion or dissolution of both public and private property relations within higher education—or the creation of more common relations beyond it (Neary and Winn 2012). This conversion movement is organized through democratically run and owned autonomous educational initiatives (Kamola and Meyerhoff 2009; Pusey 2017) or networks of teaching and learning cooperatives (Cook 2013; Jossa 2014; Neary and Winn 2017). Examples include different grassroots initiatives that have emerged from the waves of students’ and academics’ protests, like the University of Organized Optimism (Hall and Winn 2017), diffused and networked research structures such as Italian UniNomade (Berardi and Ghelfi 2010) or the Japanese student-run SHURE university (Li 2017).

## Governance

Governance is a significant dimension of higher education reality. The key questions that arise are as follows: Who and how one governs? Who and how one regulates the system/institutions?

The common good perspective on governance presupposes a vision of higher education systems driven by collegial authorities. The autonomy, academic freedom, and democratic self-regulation of the academic community of scholars and students within the public and the private higher education institutions are realized for the common good of society at large (Finkin and Post 2009). The cosmopolitan academic community, regardless of its institutional affiliation, is expected to democratically manage the production of knowledge and education, in harmony with the common good. This perspective assumes a continuity between the realm of the public and that of the common (Locatelli 2018), seeing in the modern state a guarantor and supporter of the self-ruling community of scholars and students.

The self-governed networks of the commons are respected or supported by the state and the system of public universities (Peters 2009). Educational and knowledge production practices in the form of the commons can co-exist with the regular public initiatives. Like in the case of international initiatives for pooling the teaching materials or research (like e-preprints repository—[arxiv.org](https://arxiv.org)) as the commons, the contributions or control exceed national borders. The commons can also be formed within the higher education institutions themselves. They are their daily reality (Marginson 2004a)—as non-institutionalized practices of sharing and learning together (Roxa and Martensson 2014). At this level, the commons operate by “collegial” principles, thereby escaping direct “state,” “bureaucratic,” “market,” or “managerial” coordination.

Higher education cooperatives and autonomous educational initiatives are usually democratically self-governed by their participants, creators and users (like SHURE University in Japan or Mondragon University in Spain) and either formed outside the existing higher education institutions or based on conversion or dissolution of public or private institutions (Winn 2015). All these initiatives contribute to the development and consolidation of conditions for the social and fully democratic management of the wealth of knowledge and learning processes within and beyond their institutions.

## Benefits

Proceeding to the issue of benefits from higher education that can be investigated through the set of concepts discussed in this paper, we need to look for the answers to the following questions: Who benefits? Moreover, who gets what?

The common good perspective emphasizes general collective (Tian and Liu 2018), societal (Finkin and Post 2009), relational and environmental (Barnett 2017) benefits related to the contribution/s made by higher education. As recently indicated by Simon Marginson (2016), the benefits drawn from the common good have both a global and a national dimension. On the one hand, the common good perspective fosters commonality between researchers and students across national borders: for example, through the globalization of research and the resulting scientific discussion on a global scale (Marginson 2018). On the other hand, at the national level, it favors “creating common relationships and collective benefits in the context

of solidarity social relationships within a given country” (Marginson 2016: 16–17). Moreover, from the side of higher education institutions, the orientation towards the common good enables the stabilization of a coherent set of collegial values (Finkin and Post 2009).

In the context of the liberal interpretation of the commons, the commons-based open science and open education benefit societies at large (both at national and global level), while providing accessible resources for business and firms. Furthermore, at the institutional level (for example, within a single department or institution), the commons as an organizational form could prove useful in stimulating internal cooperation that may foster external competitive advantages. Examples of this were shown recently by Roxa and Martensson (2014), in their study that focused on mechanisms for securing high-quality research and education within an institution striving for academic excellence. It has been proven that small academic groups can manage a resource that is both non-excludable and rivalrous, like academic prestige, as academic commons and in way that is beneficial and prospective for the institution itself (its students and academic employees) by both controlling the inclusion of new participants (producers and consumers of prestige) and regulation of their daily work to foster the reproduction of such commons.

When it comes to the common, the main benefits that accrue from higher education practices organized along these lines are the potential for growing social autonomy and expanded social reproduction (Roggero 2011). Institutions, like higher education cooperatives (Neary and Winn 2017) or universities of the common (Pusey 2017), stimulate internal and external (local/national/global) cooperation, secure and stabilize working relations within the organization by submitting them under democratic control (Azzellini 2016), and overcome academic hierarchies that are detrimental for the progress of knowledge production and dissemination.

## Finance

The final aspect that needs to be discussed is the sphere of higher education funding: what gets funded and by whom? Who finances the institutions and how? Who pays for higher education/research?

When the common good is considered the burden of financing of higher education (or at least the public part of this sector) is supposed to be shouldered by the state. On a general level, this vision differs little from the classic social-democratic proposals as it emphasizes the responsibility attached to the state, the importance of the extended tax system that would support the delivery of the supra-individual benefits of higher education, the cooperation required at the global scale, and the contribution to the spread of equality and social justice (Marginson 2016).

In the liberal interpretation of the commons infrastructure for sharing and reproducing them (such as different platforms for knowledge sharing, academic repositories, and so on) is supposed to be financed either through public funds or by producers and users (Peters 2009). In the case of MOOCs, for instance, public and private higher education institutions fund the production of the educational content and pool it as a common resource openly available online (Hall 2015). This vision assumes the productive coexistence of the state and the market while allowing for the possibility of the existence of a space that does not fall entirely within one of two poles (public/private). In this conception, however, there is an

intrinsic tension that hinders the establishment of a boundary around the eligible (and paid-for, for example, through fair taxes) use of the common property by private entities, which would not become another round of enclosures and appropriation.

From the perspective of the higher education activities organized according to the logic of the common, the educational and research processes are self-sustained and self-financed by the producers and users on a democratic and voluntary basis, as they are connected with the broader social movement that aims to organize socio-economic reality around values of cooperation and mutuality. Several successful recent projects could be pointed in this context, such as the long-term experiment of the Basque cooperative University of Mondragon in Spain (Wright et al. 2011; Boden et al. 2012), the cooperatively run UK-based Social Science Center in Lincoln (Neary and Winn 2017). Or alternatively, the network of Academies of Solidarity, self-funded academic organization of support that organize teaching and research practices outside the public higher education system, that emerged in 2016 in Turkey after a series of political purges of academics protesting against the Turkish government actions (Bakirzezer et al. 2018).

A systematization of the six dimensions of higher education discussed above is provided in Table 1.

**Table 1** Six higher education dimensions and the modes of their organization in line with the concepts of the common good/the commons/the common. Source: The author. \*Liberal version

|                   | The Common Good  | The Commons*   | The Common   |
|-------------------|--|--|--|
| <i>Ontology</i>   | Organic whole.   | Self-regulated relations among the subjects of practices.  | Immanent and self-determined relations among the subjects of practices.  |
| <i>Politics</i>   | Shared principles and ethical stances enable people to realize common causes.  | Equal partner with the state. Market entities drive enclosures and must be resisted or regulated.  | Antagonistic subject to both the market (capital) and the state.   |
| <i>Ownership</i>  | Clear-cut public and private property can co-exist.  | Property parallel or supplemental to public/private ownership.   | The producer-cooperative movement against and beyond public and private ownership.   |
| <i>Governance</i> | Autonomy and the self-regulation of academic community realized for the common good of society at large.                   | Self-governed commons transversal networks are respected or supported by public universities.  | Self-governed networks of higher education cooperatives and autonomous educational initiatives converse with or dissolute public and private institutions. |
| <i>Benefits</i>   | General collective, societal, relational, and environmental benefits. Stabilization of a coherent set of collegial values. | Open science and open education benefit society at large while providing accessible resources for business and firms. Stimulates internal cooperation and brings advantages in external competition. | The potential for growing social autonomy and social reproduction is enhanced. Stimulates internal and external cooperation.                               |
| <i>Finance</i>    | The state/public funding (taxes)   | Publicly (or privately) supported.   | A self-sustained and self-funded network of autonomous organizations.  |

## The common and the public

Finally, it is not enough to clarify the various concepts from the order of the common in the context of higher education; there is also a need to map their relations with the widely discussed concepts from the order of the public (the public good, public interest, the public goods or the public), with which they are most often confused.

If the utilitarian and contractarian idea of public interest assesses the collective benefits of higher education from the standpoint of the individual and the notion of the public good from the standpoint of state and society, then the concept of the common good must be assessed from the standpoint of the organic whole. This approach grasps both the individual and the collective benefits, as well as those emerging from the intensification (and rise in quality) of the relations among individuals. However, the concepts of the public good and the common good (at least, when it comes to their discursive use in higher education research) have no clear boundaries and are used interchangeably (Marginson 2016). They both express a more extensive normative call to which researchers like to refer in the current situation of the crisis, marketization, or privatization of higher education. Some researchers also postulate the continuity between the public and the common good (Locatelli 2018), pointing out that the higher education contributes to the common good is dependent on the existence and support of the steady, public-good-oriented state.

The commons shift the discussion to the sphere of economics and thus are usually conflated with public goods. In Paul Samuelson's (1954) terms, the commons belong to the category of rivalrous and non-excludable goods: that is, individual consumption could deplete or limit them, but exclusion from access is relatively hard or impossible. Unlike public goods, the commons in higher education have a material and efficient subject (not an abstract one: that is, the state) that secures their reproduction. They cannot be treated merely as resources, as they are always connected with and based on a specific set of rules that enable production and reproduction (Roxa and Martensoon 2014).

Last but not least, in contrast with Dewey's public (Dewey 1927), the common is not just a shared concern addressed politically by the state, but also the material condition for addressing and solving such problem. The public manifests itself when the will of the citizens is mediated through the state, its agendas, and its officials' actions. The common is instead a flat and horizontal reality of democratic cooperation between the actors involved in a given reality (Roggero 2011). Unlike the public, the common is never constituted in the stable form of the state; rather, it is permanently engaged in the act of constituting, that is, it is continuously reshaped, transformed and adopted according to the democratic will of its co-producers and consumers (Pusey 2017).

## The relevance of the common for higher education research

The purpose of this article has been to outline a conceptual framework of the common and its uses by higher education researchers involved in discussing future directions with regard to the sector's development. I have intended to show how the various implicitly applied political ontologies translate into coherent descriptions or prescriptive visions over how higher education is, or should be, organized and according to what criteria. Thus, the three different concepts—the common good, the commons, the common—encountered in the discourse on the common have been contextualized and discussed against the background of specific

dimensions of higher education (ontology, politics, ownership, governance, benefits, and finance). For various reasons, this paper provides more than just a purely academic exercise in conceptual systematization.

First, it brings more clarity to the debate on higher education and its contribution to the common good or its aspect that are organized in the form of the academic commons. Not only, contemporary higher education research needs theories derived from the empirical data (Ashwin 2012), but also a more ontological reflection on the existing concepts and their uses are needed if this sub-discipline is to be able to develop them further. This first approximation of a systematization can be successfully used to not only map this field of rarely discussed literature but also to pose more precise research questions or to develop empirical research programs capable of exploring the reality of what is common in contemporary global higher education.

Second, it is a proposition of a way out of “methodological nationalism” and “embedded statism” in (higher) education research (Dale 2005). As a space beyond (or between) the market and the state, as flows that traverse the local, national and global levels of higher education, concepts from the order of the common (and the reality that lays behind them) turn our attention to the problems outside those methodologically naturalized “containers” for societies. They provide us with a different ontological understanding of the social in higher education in its relative autonomy—as a phenomenon that may be analyzed and shaped independently across the institutional and national borders.

Third, the conceptual set of the common allows for making a step beyond the opposition between the public and the private in higher education research and policy. Thus, it not only fuels researchers’ imagination, but also provides a viable toolbox for thinking and designing a different political script that could lead the sector beyond the market-driven hybridization of public and private (Guzman-Valenzuela 2016), and beyond the contradictions, shortcomings and dead ends of competition-driven academic capitalism (Slaughter and Rhoades 2004; Münch 2014; Cantwell and Kauppinen 2014). The conceptual set discussed above emphasizes the non-individual, relational aspects of the higher education reality and offers a stable ground for the cooperation and solidarity that overflow the boundaries of national systems. Moreover, it creates an adequate context for developing a sense as well as practices of shared responsibility for the fate of global science and higher education, as well as to indicate its material subject. While academic capitalism and competition remains global, the cooperation for the common good in this sector needs to turn global as well. Social, economic, and environmental challenges that are faced on a planetary scale desperately need such an approach. Because of the deep roots of the idea of cooperation in science (Marginson 2018), one that transcends national or institutional particularisms, higher education institutions and systems have a chance to stand in the vanguard of change, which, in our times, seems imperative.

However, for this reason, it is necessary to address the growing inequality and widespread competition that penetrates every dimension of academic life, as well as the ineffectiveness of individualized survival strategies in an accelerated academia. Here, the conceptual set of the common comes in handy, offering the academic community not only the ethical guideposts, ideas for the ways of how to effectively self-organize the crucial resources but, moreover, shedding the light on democratic ways out of a deadlock formed by the apparent alternative of market and/or state coordination of the sector. Regardless of whether the clues provided in this article are taken up and used by the community of higher education researchers to redesign their

thinking and practice or not, the way in which we address these issues will determine the future of universities and higher education.

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