
THE COMMERCIALIZATION OF HIGHER EDUCATION: TRENDS, IMPACTS, AND FUTURE CHALLENGES

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Keywords:

Commercialization of higher education, development trends, key research actors, future governance.

ABSTRACT

This study maps the global research landscape concerning higher education commercialization. Driven by economic globalization and reduced public funding, universities have progressively transitioned from societal public goods to competitive commercial services. Despite extensive qualitative evaluations on this institutional shift, the domain's intellectual architecture remains fragmented. To bridge this analytical gap, a hybrid methodology was executed, integrating a Systematic Literature Review (SLR) via the PRISMA protocol and bibliometric mapping using VOSviewer. Based on 136 core Scopus articles (1985–2024), the historical trajectory is classified into three evolutionary phases: Initiation (1985–2002), Acceleration (2003–2014), and Maturation (2015–2024). Actor mapping identifies Wu, W. as the most productive author, the University of Tehran and Moscow Aviation Institute as leading institutions, and the United States and United Kingdom as the dominant contributing nations. Spatial network analysis highlights a dense, collaborative UK-European axis, while the US acts as a macro-structural bridge to Eastern research hubs. Keyword co-occurrence clustering reveals "higher education" (n = 72) and "commercialization" (n = 54) as central nodes with strong structural proximity to technology transfer and innovation networks. The synthesis reveals that future governance must navigate critical challenges regarding marketization pressures, technology transfer regulation, and socio-economic access barriers. Ultimately, this research outlines emerging thematic directions toward institutional entrepreneurship, administrative decentralization, and tripartite co-regulatory research and development (R&D) alliances, offering strategic structural insights for policymakers balancing commercial pragmatism with public good values.

INTRODUCTION

The commercialization of higher education has emerged as a prominent global phenomenon, deeply driven by the forces of economic globalization, structural reductions in public funding, and the expanding role of market principles within academic ecosystems. Over the past few decades, universities worldwide have progressively transitioned from operating primarily as societal public goods to functioning as competitive commercial services. This macro-level shift has catalyzed widespread marketization and privatization, driving higher education institutions to embrace corporatization through corporate management strategies, intensified competition for resource extraction, and a heavy reliance on strict performance metrics (Bertolin, 2011; Verger, 2013). Concurrently, rapid globalization has pushed these institutions to establish international campuses, recruit transnational students, and aggressively pursue global prestige, turning knowledge

production into an economically commodified asset (Healey, 2008).

However, this pervasive transition toward profit-driven frameworks has triggered profound institutional and academic repercussions across international education systems. The intense push for corporatization has frequently resulted in a severe erosion of academic freedom, diminished faculty autonomy, and unsustainable institutional workloads (Hao, 2015; Hancock, 2020). Moreover, institutional priorities have significantly drifted toward market-driven and highly technical disciplines, effectively marginalizing foundational sciences, arts, and the humanities (Verger, 2013). While these commercial endeavors successfully secure alternative revenue pipelines and cultivate practical industry-academic collaborations, they simultaneously trigger serious quality assurance vulnerabilities, inflate educational disparities, and threaten to diminish academic standards in favor of corporate financial sustainability (Bok, 2003; Oranga, 2024).

This shifting educational landscape manifests as a multi-dimensional crisis of institutional identity, visible through the integration of disruptive digital technologies and evolving funding reliance models. Modern universities are increasingly pressured to align their instructional delivery with commercial digital ecosystems, which introduces substantial risks regarding socio-economic inequality and technological dependency on external corporate providers (Pashkov & Pashkova, 2022). Furthermore, institutions in both developed and developing regions face volatile vulnerabilities due to their extreme over-reliance on international student tuition fees and volatile market-based funding mechanisms (Dorasamy & Mugano, 2022). This commercialized configuration creates an environment where educational access becomes progressively stratified along socio-economic lines, challenging the historical, ethical, and foundational mandate of higher education as an agent of equitable societal advancement.

Despite a substantial volume of literature analyzing the individual socioeconomic, pedagogical, and ethical dimensions of educational marketization, a significant analytical gap remains regarding the macro-level bibliometric consolidation of this entire academic domain. Extant studies heavily favor localized qualitative assessments or single-country case studies, leaving the global intellectual structure and thematic evolution of higher education commercialization fragmented. The novelty of this study lies in its systematic approach to bridging this critical gap by executing an integrated Systematic Literature Review (SLR) strictly coupled with advanced bibliometric mapping. By employing the PRISMA protocol and VOSviewer software simultaneously, this research maps the comprehensive trajectory of the field, uncovers the underlying intellectual architecture, and reveals hidden thematic clusters that traditional narrative reviews fail to capture.

The primary objective of this investigation is to provide a comprehensive, transparent, and rigorous mapping of the global research landscape concerning the commercialization of higher education. Specifically, this study aims to trace the structural evolution and chronological trends of scientific publications within this domain, highlighting how scholarly focus has shifted over time. Additionally, this study seeks to systematically identify the key research actors including the most influential authors, leading institutions, and contributing countries while visually untangling their collaborative networks. Ultimately, this research aims to synthesize persistent thematic challenges and

map out critical future research frontiers, offering strategic structural insights for policymakers and academic stakeholders navigating the tensions between commercial pragmatism and public good values.

To achieve these research objectives, this study addresses the following three research questions:

RQ1: What are the development trends and evolutionary phases of scientific publications regarding the commercialization of higher education in the global academic literature?

RQ2: Who are the key research actors including influential authors, institutions, and countries contributing to the development of higher education commercialization research, and what does their collaborative network look like?

RQ3: What are the critical future challenges and emerging thematic directions identified within the existing literature for the future governance of higher education?

METHOD AND ANALYSIS

The approach used in this study is a hybrid method that integrates a Systematic Literature Review (SLR) using the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) protocol and bibliometric analysis utilizing the VOSviewer software. This combination aims to provide a comprehensive, structured, and objective analysis, where the PRISMA framework ensures that all stages of identification, screening, eligibility, and final article inclusion are conducted transparently and free from subjective bias (Fundoni et al., 2023; Mishra & Mishra, 2023; Moher et al., 2014; Donthu et al., 2021). Meanwhile, the bibliometric analysis via VOSviewer complements these qualitative findings quantitatively by mapping the structure of knowledge, document relationships such as bibliographic coupling, cross-country collaborations, and keyword co-occurrences to detect emerging research fronts.

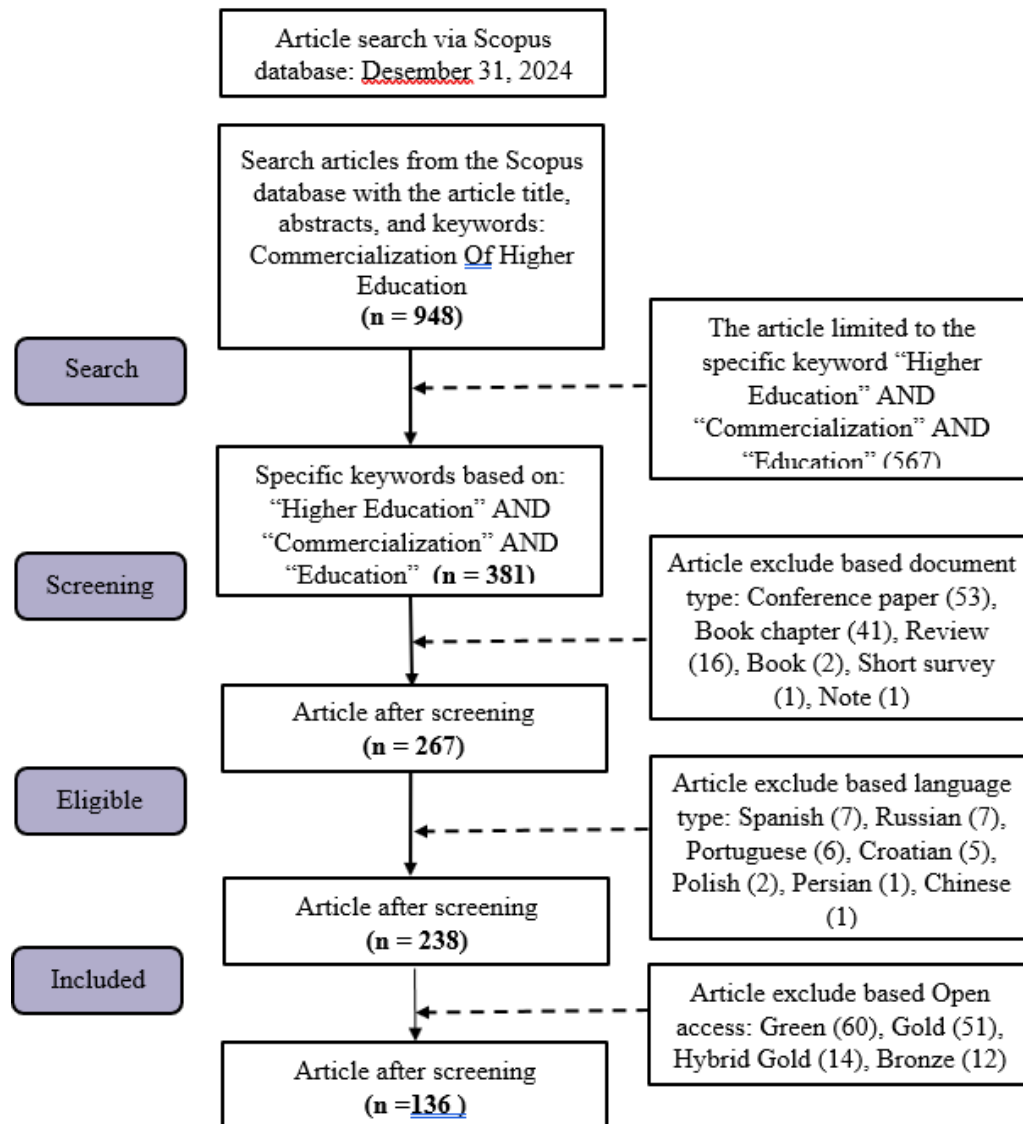


Figure 1. Systematic Literatur Review Information Flow Using PRISMA

The data collection and literature screening process initiated with an electronic search on the Scopus database executed on December 31, 2024. The initial search utilized a specific query targeted at titles, abstracts, and keywords using the phrase "Commercialization Of Higher Education," which successfully retrieved a total of 948 raw articles. To ensure strict thematic relevance, this initial pool was refined using a combination of specific keywords: "Higher Education" AND "Commercialization" AND "Education." This restriction eliminated 567 documents, leaving 381 articles. The screening stage then proceeded to exclude documents based on their type; at this point, the researcher excluded conference papers (53), book chapters (41), reviews (16), books (2), short surveys (1), and notes (1), resulting in 267 articles to be assessed for eligibility.

In the final selection phase, exclusion criteria based on linguistic and document accessibility aspects were applied to determine the final sample for analysis. Documents not published in English were removed from the dataset, which included articles in Spanish (7), Russian (7), Portuguese (6), Croatian (5), Polish (2), Persian (1), and Chinese (1), reducing

the article count to 238. Subsequently, screening was performed based on open-access status, excluding articles categorized under Green (60), Gold (51), Hybrid Gold (14), and Bronze (12) access types. Through this entire rigorous selection pipeline guided by the PRISMA flow diagram, a final set of 136 articles met all eligibility criteria and was included for deep thematic synthesis and subsequent bibliometric mapping using VOSviewer.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

RQ1: What are the development trends and evolutionary phases of scientific publications regarding the commercialization of higher education in the global academic literature?

The structural evolution and chronological trends of scientific publications regarding the commercialization of higher education show a dynamic trajectory. Based on the 136 articles retrieved from the Scopus database spanning from 1985 to 2024, the researcher categorized the development of this field into three distinct evolutionary phases. This chronological distribution reflects how global academic literature shifted from early conceptual warnings to empirical observations of market-driven education systems.

Documents by year

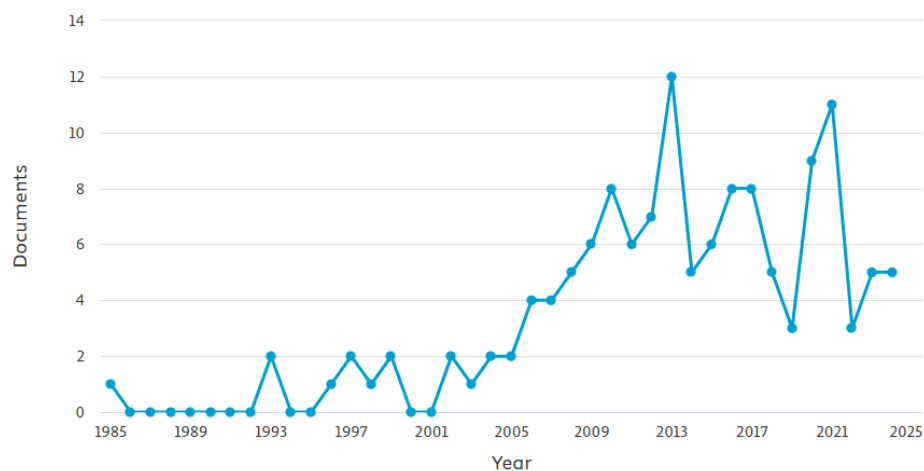


Figure 2. Number Of Commercialization Of Higher Education Publication

Source: Scopus database

Evolutionary Phases

Initiation and Early Emergence Phase (1985–2002)

The first phase is characterized by a very low and fragmented volume of publications, accumulating only 13 articles over nearly two decades. The topic first appeared in the dataset in 1985 with a single document, followed by a prolonged publication void between 1986 and 1992. Throughout this entire period, the annual output never exceeded 2 articles per year. During this era, higher education institutions were predominantly viewed and operated as traditional public goods heavily funded by the state. Consequently, the discourse surrounding the commercialization of universities was still in its embryonic stage, with academic debates remaining isolated rather than consolidated into a distinct research domain.

Acceleration and Structural Transition Phase (2003–2014)

A major shift occurred in 2003, marking the beginning of an acceleration and structural transition phase that generated 71 articles. Publication volumes began to rise steadily, with clear spikes in 2010 ($n = 8$), 2012 ($n = 7$), and reaching its historical zenith in 2013 with 12 documents the highest annual output recorded in the dataset. This sharp increase reflects the immediate academic backlash and critical evaluation by global researchers toward the mass implementation of New Public Management (NPM), neoliberal reforms, and the aggressive marketization of university systems worldwide. During this phase, commercialization transitioned from an isolated institutional phenomenon into a highly debated, centralized area of global governance research.

Stabilization and Maturation Phase (2015–2024)

The final phase establishes the maturation and thematic consolidation of the field, yielding 52 articles. While the extreme peak of 2013 subsided, the annual publication rate settled into a resilient and consistent pattern, maintaining an average of 5 to 11 documents per year. The highest outputs within this decade were observed in 2020 ($n = 9$) and 2021 with 11 documents. The phase concluded with a steady output of 5 documents annually across both 2023 and 2024. This sustained productivity indicates that the commercialization of higher education is no longer treated as a temporary trend, but as a permanent, mature area of scientific inquiry focusing on structural adjustments.

Key Development Trends

Throughout these three evolutionary phases, the researcher identified several dominant thematic trends that shaped the literature:

1. **Marketization and Privatization:** A continuous trend across Phase 2 and Phase 3, where higher education shifted from state reliance to student tuition fees, commercial ranking pressures, and student loans (Brown & Carasso, 2013). This commodification raised deep socio-economic concerns regarding equity and affordability (Patel, 2022).
2. **Integration with Industry and Innovation Networks:** Moving deeper into Phase 3, the literature increasingly focused on how higher education commercializes its actual research outputs. Scholars evaluated industry-academia-research collaborations as tools to secure alternative funding streams and drive regional entrepreneurship (Macias Urrego et al., 2018).
3. **Internationalization and Competitive Mobility:** The pursuit of transnational students and global partnerships emerged as a major commercial driver. Later literature heavily critiqued this, calling for a transition from purely competitive, profit-seeking recruitment toward more inclusive internationalization models (Rajkhowa, 2024).

RQ2: Who are the key research actors including influential authors, institutions, and countries contributing to the development of higher education commercialization research, and what does their collaborative network look like?

Based on the bibliographic data retrieved from the Scopus database, the mapping of key research actors reveals a highly fragmented contribution structure led by a few pivotal scholars. The researcher notes that Wu, W. occupies the leading position as the most productive author within the domain of higher education commercialization,

contributing a total of 3 scholarly documents. Following closely is a cohesive tier of researchers with equivalent productivity, each holding 2 published documents, namely Gholipour, A., Huggins, R., McArthur, J., and Novikov, S.V. The prominence of these scholars at the apex of the publication rankings underscores their strategic role in constructing the theoretical foundations and expanding the empirical boundaries surrounding the entry of market forces into the global academic sphere.

Documents by author

Compare the document counts for up to 15 authors.

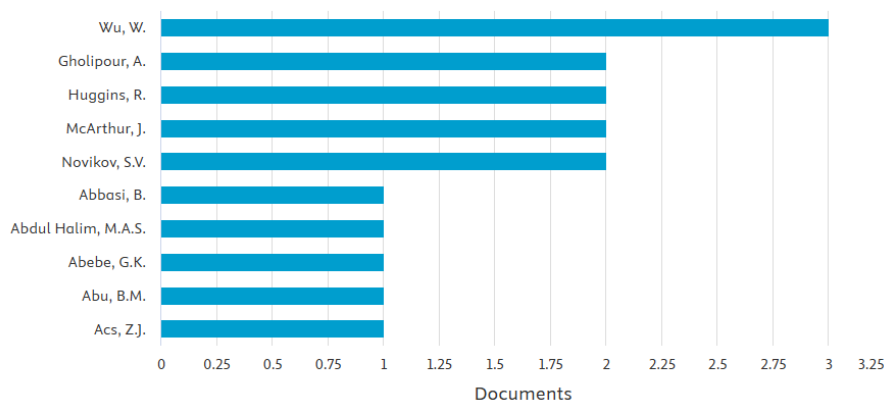


Figure 3. Publication by Author (Top 10)

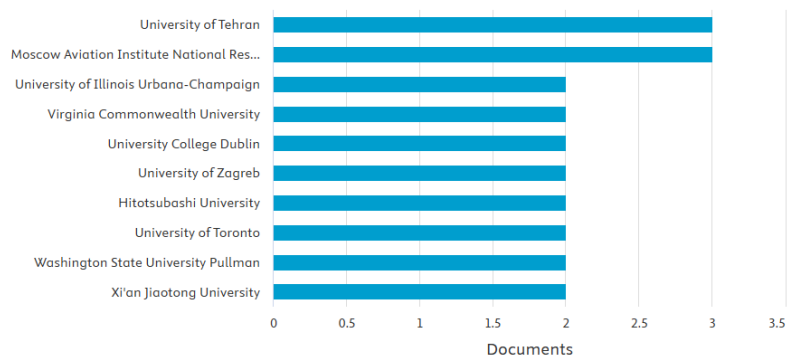
Source: Scopus database

Conversely, the remaining individuals among the top ten key actors, including Abbasi, B., Abdul Halim, M.A.S., Abebe, G.K., Abu, B.M., and Acs, Z.J., are each recorded as contributing 1 scholarly document to the dataset. This distribution pattern reflects a typical characteristic of multi-disciplinary research domains, where a significant portion of the scientific community provides single or sporadic contributions rather than sustained niche publications. Despite their smaller quantitative footprint, the inclusion of these authors introduces a rich diversity of regional and sectoral perspectives—ranging from innovation governance to local socio-economic impacts—which remains critical for a holistic understanding of the global dynamics and implications of commercialized higher education.

At the institutional level, the dissemination of scientific literature on the commercialization of higher education is driven by a diverse array of global academic centers. The researcher identified that the University of Tehran and the Moscow Aviation Institute National Research University lead the institutional rankings, with each contributing 3 scholarly documents to the core dataset. The prominent standing of these institutions emphasizes their active engagement in examining the operational shifts, managerial reforms, and financial adjustments that occur when state-funded educational structures intersect with commercial models. Their leading output positions them as critical geographic and intellectual hubs within this specific domain of governance and educational research.

Documents by affiliation

Compare the document counts for up to 15 affiliations.

**Figure 4.** Publication by Institutions (Top 10)*Source: Scopus database*

Following the leading tier is a highly balanced group of prestigious global institutions, each accounting for 2 published documents. This cohort includes prominent North American institutions such as the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign, Virginia Commonwealth University, the University of Toronto, and Washington State University Pullman. Additionally, this tier is strengthened by international contributions from University College Dublin (Ireland), the University of Zagreb (Croatia), Hitotsubashi University (Japan), and Xi'an Jiaotong University (China). The wide geographic distribution among these top-tier affiliations highlights that the marketization and commercialization of higher education is not confined to a single region, but represents a shared, cross-continental academic concern affecting both Western and Eastern institutional models alike.

The geographical distribution of the literature reveals that research on the commercialization of higher education is heavily spearheaded by prominent Western Anglo-Saxon academic systems. The researcher observes that the United States leads global scientific productivity with a commanding total of 25 documents, closely followed by the United Kingdom with 20 documents. Together, these two nations account for a significant portion of the entire dataset. This overwhelming dominance reflects the historical and systemic reality that the US and UK have been the primary incubators for intensive marketization, student tuition-dependent models, and university corporatization over the past several decades. Following this leading tier, Australia holds a strong position with 9 documents, further underscoring how aggressively highly commercialized, international student-driven university models are critiqued and evaluated within the Anglosphere.

Documents by country or territory

Compare the document counts for up to 15 countries/territories.

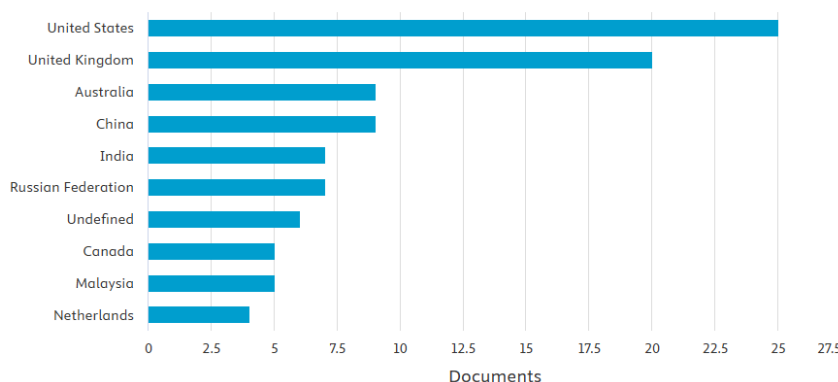


Figure 5. Publication by Institutions (Top 10)

Source: Scopus database

Concurrently, the research domain exhibits a robust and expanding footprint across major emerging economies and non-Western territories. China matches Australia’s productivity with 9 documents, reflecting its intense scholastic focus on managing the intersection between public higher education governance and regional innovation ecosystems. This is complemented by significant contributions from India (7 documents) and the Russian Federation (7 documents), where scholars frequently evaluate the structural tensions regarding educational affordability, equity, and privatization. The remaining top contributors include Canada (5 documents), Malaysia (5 documents), and the Netherlands (4 documents), alongside a small segment of unclassified or unmapped data labeled as Undefined (6 documents). This extensive cross-continental distribution indicates that while the foundational theories of educational commercialization originated in Western market models, its operational impacts and structural challenges have evolved into a truly global socioeconomic concern spanning diverse political and institutional landscapes.



Figure 6. Visualization of countries in the network

Source: VOSviewer software output

Table 1. Countries in the network

Country	Documents	Citations	Total Link Strength
United Kingdom	20	949	11
Netherlands	4	126	10
Denmark	2	43	9
Portugal	2	28	8
Sweden	3	78	8
Belgium	1	19	7
Finland	2	33	7
Germany	3	102	7
United States	25	626	6
Burkina Faso	1	2	4

Source: VOSviewer software output

The spatial analysis of the country collaboration network reveals distinct dynamics of global partnerships, structurally separated into theoretical and empirical interaction clusters. Based on the bibliometric data, although the United States leads in global scientific productivity with a commanding total of 25 documents and 626 citations, its total link strength is recorded at 6. According to the VOSviewer visualization, the United States acts as a macro-structural bridge connecting collaboration lines to the eastern hemisphere, exhibiting distinct partnership pathways toward China and the Russian Federation. This pattern implies that while the United States maintains a massive and relatively independent research footprint, it selectively forms cross-continental collaborations to evaluate the global ramifications of higher education marketization.

Conversely, the European academic axis demonstrates a highly clustered and deeply integrated collaboration structure. The United Kingdom emerges as the most central actor within this global partnership network, boasting the highest total link strength of 11, backed by 20 documents and 949 citations the highest citation count across the entire dataset. In the VOSviewer network map, the United Kingdom sits at the epicenter of the European cluster, surrounded by exceptionally tight partnership links with the Netherlands (link strength = 10, 4 documents), Sweden (link strength = 8, 3 documents), Denmark (link strength = 9), Finland (link strength = 7), and Australia, which bridges the Anglosphere into this regional grouping. This highly dense structural relationship along the UK-European axis confirms a concentrated and systematically unified research effort among European nations, collectively investigating the impacts of New Public Management and the commercial transformation of universities within the region.

RQ3: What are the critical future challenges and emerging thematic directions identified within the existing literature for the future governance of higher education?

Keyword co-occurrence analysis is employed to map the intellectual architecture, conceptual interconnections, and dominant thematic distributions within the literature on higher education commercialization. Through the VOSviewer visualization extracted from the 136 core articles, the density and proximity between nodes indicate how frequently specific terminologies are investigated simultaneously by global scholars. This network

framework is polarized into several color-coded clusters that reflect the diversification of research focuses, ranging from macro-level university governance dimensions to micro-level market alliance instruments.

The largest node in the visualization is occupied by "higher education" (72 occurrences, total link strength = 264) and "commercialization" (54 occurrences, total link strength = 220), which collectively indicate the primary focus of this discourse. The interconnected network radiating from these central nodes demonstrates an exceptionally strong structural proximity toward the technological innovation cluster. This proves that the paradigm shift of higher education from a public good to a market commodity is consistently mediated by an institution's capacity to exploit applied research for external corporate and industrial interests.

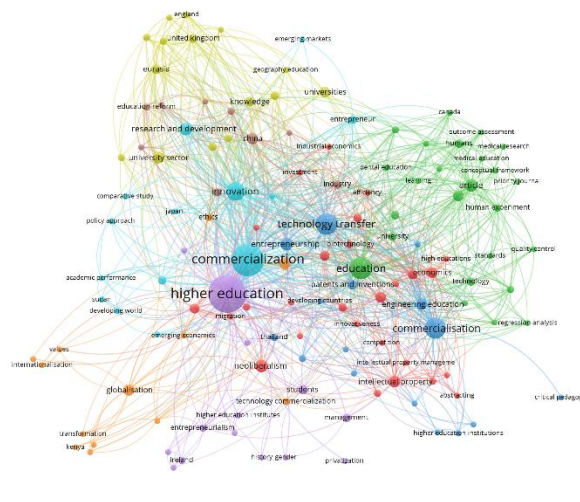


Figure 7. Co-occurrence Framework and Representation of Key Terms

Source: VOSviewer software output

Table 2. Co-occurrence Framework and Representation of Key Terms

Keyword	Occurrences	Total Link Strength	Semantics & Research Focus Area
higher education	72	264	Primary material object; macro-level institutional shift analysis.
commercialization	54	220	Substantial focus; commodification of academic outputs and corporatization.
technology transfer	24	152	Bridging instrument; downstreaming of patents, licensing, and industry collaboration.
education	25	124	Foundational value; the debate of pedagogy versus global market pragmatism.
innovation	18	136	External driver; the role of universities within regional economic ecosystems.
commercialisation	23	99	Linguistic variation (UK); strengthening the commercialization focus of the

			British system.
article	8	64	Formal validation; documentation of pure scientific literature growth.
research and development	8	58	Activity orientation; market-driven applied research funding models.
university sector	7	58	Institutional boundaries; adoption of corporate management in the public sector.
entrepreneurship	8	56	Modern characteristics; transformation toward the entrepreneurial university.

Source: VOSviewer software output

Future Governance: Critical Challenges and Emerging Thematic Directions

The strategic orientation of future higher education governance is heavily dictated by the conceptual density and structural connections of prominent keywords within the current literature. Based on the keyword co-occurrence network metrics, the core tension in future governance revolves around managing the transition from traditional public instruction to high-intensity commercial ecosystems. This is anchored by the foundational nodes "higher education", "commercialization", and "education". Moving forward, governance frameworks can no longer view universities as isolated teaching units; they must evolve to regulate complex, market-driven networks where institutional survival relies on balancing academic integrity with fiscal viability.

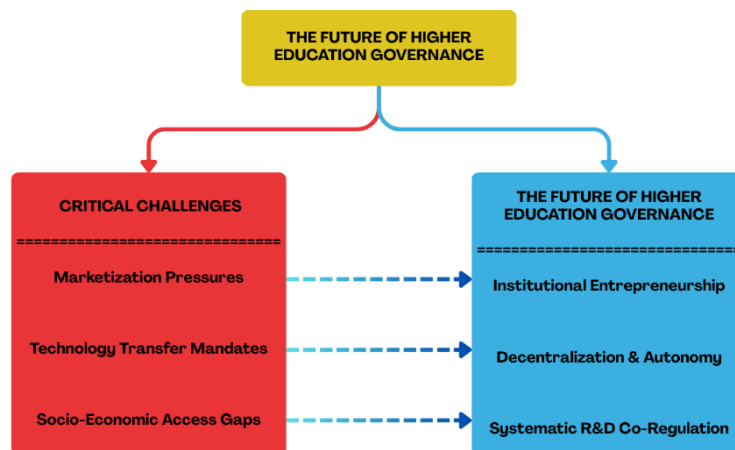


Figure 8. Future of Higher Education: Critical Challenges and Emerging Thematic Directions

Source: Adapted from a researcher (Bertolin, 2011; De Boer & Huisman, 2020; Álvarez-Hevia & Hernández-Castilla, 2021; Heck & Mu, 2015; Huisman & Huang, 2022; Maringe & Chiramba, 2020; AL-Ali & Marks, 2022; Fadeeva et al., 2014)

Critical Challenges in Future Governance

Based on the synthesis of the literature and keyword network topographies, the most pressing structural challenges in future governance are categorized into three primary points:

1. Navigating Marketization and the Erosion of Public Value: The aggressive marketization of the "university sector" (7 occurrences, total link strength = 58) has intensified tensions

- between profit-driven strategies and the traditional mission of universities as public goods. This trend risks expanding socio-economic disparities, eroding core academic values, and prioritizing consumerism over instructional quality (Bertolin, 2011).
2. **Regulating Technology Transfer and Commercial Innovation:** The heavy network density surrounding the nodes "*technology transfer*" (24 occurrences, *total link strength* = 152) and "*innovation*" (18 occurrences, *total link strength* = 136) poses significant regulatory challenges. Governance frameworks have frequently lagged behind rapid commercial knowledge extraction, creating legal and ethical vulnerabilities regarding patent ownership and public-private spin-offs (Macias Urrego et al., 2018).
 3. **Addressing Systemic Equity and Access Barriers:** As market policies expand, structural inequalities widen, particularly in developing regions (Global South). Internationalization and commercial student recruitment mechanisms risk turning higher education into an exclusive luxury commodity, leaving vulnerable student populations behind and widening the digital and economic divide (Maringe & Chiramba, 2020).

Emerging Thematic Directions

To counter these challenges, the existing literature points toward an operational restructuring of university management, highlighted by the following emerging governance directions:

1. **Fostering Institutional Entrepreneurship and Corporate Agility:** Supported by the node "*entrepreneurship*" (8 occurrences, *total link strength* = 56), there is a definitive shift toward cultivating agile, self-sustaining university structures. This emerging direction emphasizes designing operational policies that encourage institutional self-sufficiency and resource agglomeration without completely dismantling academic autonomy.
2. **Transitioning Toward Decentralization and Greater Autonomy:** Governance trends reveal a movement away from rigid, state-centralized command structures toward decentralized models (De Boer & Huisman, 2020). Granting greater institutional autonomy allows universities to adapt more flexibly to localized market demands and volatile global economic shifts.
3. **Structuring Co-Regulatory Research and Development (R&D) Alliances:** Anchored by the node "*research and development*" (8 occurrences, *total link strength* = 58), future governance models are progressively aligning with collaborative R&D frameworks. This direction involves creating balanced tripartite networks (co-aligning universities, state actors, and private corporations) to co-regulate commercial scientific outputs while actively striving to preserve quality systems, ecological sustainability, and ethical oversight (Fadeeva et al., 2014).

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, this study systematically unpacks the macro-level evolutionary trajectory, collaborative actor networks, and conceptual frameworks governing the commercialization of higher education from 1985 to 2024. The integrated bibliometric and systematic synthesis proves that the field has successfully transitioned from an embryonic, fragmented discourse into a mature, stable domain of global scientific inquiry that is heavily focused on structural management. The clear concentration of publication outputs within

Western Anglo-Saxon systems notably the United States and the United Kingdom and the high density of the UK-European collaboration axis highlight where the foundational theories of educational marketization are most aggressively critiqued. Concurrently, the structural alignment between core higher education nodes, technology transfer, and entrepreneurship underscores that knowledge production has permanently integrated with commercial corporate ecosystems. To resolve the persistent tensions between commercial pragmatism and public good values, future university governance must shift from reactive management toward proactive, adaptive co-regulation. This can be achieved by establishing transparent tripartite alliances among universities, state actors, and private industries, thereby safeguarding equitable socio-economic access, protecting academic autonomy, and preserving educational quality assurance within an increasingly commercialized global landscape.

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