Rethinking the Narrative around Teaching Excellence in English Higher Education: A Social Identity Perspective on Education, Learning and Leadership

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Purposes

- Contribute to a more nuanced debate around the nature of 'teaching excellence' in HE policy making and leadership in the face of the discourses of **'employability', 'graduate earnings' and 'student outcomes'** currently prevalent within the English Teaching Excellence Framework

- Contend that **Social Identity Theory offers a conceptual framework** for regarding students as embryonic citizens and equips HE policy makers and leaders with an **alternative discursive language** in order to re-imagine and pursue university outcomes for the public good rather than as a market place for individual student consumers

HE Policy Making: Purposes and Discourse

We now live in age in which discussions about education are **dominated by measurement** and **comparisons of educational outcomes** and that these measurements as such seem to direct much of educational policy and, through this, also much of educational practice. The danger here is that we end up valuing what is measured, rather than that we engage in measurement of what we value.

(Biesta, 2009: 43)

OfS TEF 4 yearly policy: <u>Regulatory advice 22: Guidance on the Teaching Excellence Framework 2023 - Office for Students</u>

Gold, Silver, Bronze or Requires Improvement awarded on

Student Experience and Assessment

B1 Academic experience

B2 Resources, support and student engagement

B4 Assessment and awards

Student Outcomes and Educational Gains

B3 Minimum baseline student metric outcomes on post first year continuation, award completion and employment progression

B5 qualifications to align with sector-recognised standards

Provider and student submissions: evidence of 'excellence' in student experiences and outcomes - up to 25 pages

HE Policy Making: Purposes and Discourse

Policy-making is typically informed by a leading family of ideas that frame, articulate and populate government. Policy-making is iterative and reproductive on the basis of the dominant ideas which become institutionalised over time. These ideas remain ascendant until displaced by another family of ideas, mostly during or following a crisis.

(Marginson, 2013: 353) in Brown and Hillman (2023: 9)
https://www.hepi.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2023/12/Neoliberal-or-not-English-higher-education.pdf

Neoliberalism (Shepherd, 2018: 1669)

- **Market-type mechanisms and competition**
- **Commodification of services**
- **Value for money and doing more with less - efficiency**
- **Central regulation and/or control**
- **Entrepreneurial culture**
- **Priority shift from universalism to individualism**
- **Service quality and consumer orientation**
- **Choice**
- **Greater flexibility of pay and conditions**
- **Contractual relationships (purchaser/provider)**
- **Blurring of public-private sector boundaries - increased scope for private sector provision**

Macfarlane, Bolden & Watermeyer (2024) Three Perspectives on HE Leadership

1. **Traditionalist:** concerned with the cultural context, arguing that the import of neoliberal business practices into university leadership and management has undermined academic self-governance.

2. **Reformist:** focuses on values from a social justice perspective arguing for a more democratic and inclusive style of leadership including participation from historically under-represented groups.

3. **Pragmatist:** functionally focused in identifying the capabilities, skills and competences needed for effective leadership in universities at all levels.

NOT mutually exclusive

HE Policy Making: Purposes and Discourse

Neoliberalism's impact on HE: associated with a range of other 'discourses'…

(Tight, 2018: 277)

Discourses are about what can be said, and thought, but also about who can speak, when, where and with what authority. Discourses embody the meaning and use of propositions and words. **Thus, certain possibilities for thought are constructed. Words are ordered and combined in particular ways and other combinations are displaced or excluded**

(Ball, 1993: 14)

Policy Discourse: 'a system which structures the way we perceive reality' (Mills, 2003: 56) For example,

Core Strategy Education 2022-2026: Excellent Graduate Futures (Man Met, 2023: 19)

"We will provide students with deep professional and transferable skills to prepare them for their future after University, whether that be in graduate-level employment or further study".

'Skills is mentioned 21 times in the educational strategy, in contrast knowledge is mentioned 5 times.'

Ashwin (2023) Man Met Learning and Teaching Conference: *Building a Transformational Active Learning Community*

So what's going on?

Contemporary Higher Education Sagas (Scott, 2022: 12)

Present Saga: Higher education and political economy

Foreground	Mass higher education	Market' higher education
	Structural, organisational, policy and strategy	
Hinterland	Welfare State, social reform	Regulatory State, Neo-liberal economy
	Ideological, affective ⟶ **human capital theory**	

With the OfS operating as a 'dirigiste regulator… for openly political and ideological' purposes' (Scott, 2021: 164) in a 'quasi-market' (Marginson, 2018) underpinned by an economic emphasis on developing human capital (Becker, 1964).

Similarly, Marginson (2023a) summarises this approach:

- Models the student as a consumer/self-investor

- Defines the graduate in extrinsic economic terms as a **unit of human capital** with a **market value**

- Primary purpose of HE is now said to be the production of **'employable' graduates**

- TEF: seeks to evaluate/measure teaching and learning not in terms of what is learned, let alone the contribution of HE to self-development, but in terms of **graduate earnings** and **student satisfaction in consumer surveys**

Foundational narrative of Human Capital Theory (Marginson, 2019: 287)

Education drives the marginal productivity of labour and marginal productivity drives earnings

↓

Value of investment in education defined by the lifetime earnings of educated labour

↓

Education, work, productivity and earnings: linear continuum.

↓

Educated students acquire embodied productivity (portable human capital) used by employers, graduate earnings follow.

↓

HE more or less automatically triggers private enrichment, career success and national economic growth.

# 'Employability' in HE policy: Values and Purposes (Tight, 2023: 1)

- HE graduates should be able to make immediate & productive inputs to the economy

- HE: repositioned as a means to an end (worthwhile employment) rather than an end in itself (the development of intellectually well-rounded individuals)

Research evidence shows that:

❑ No general agreement on which employability skills are most important

❑ No compelling evidence that employability initiatives actually work, beyond what HE already does

❑ Many employers remain happy with the quality of the graduates they employ or are unwilling to engage with HE in employability initiatives

HE Policy Making: Purposes and Discourse
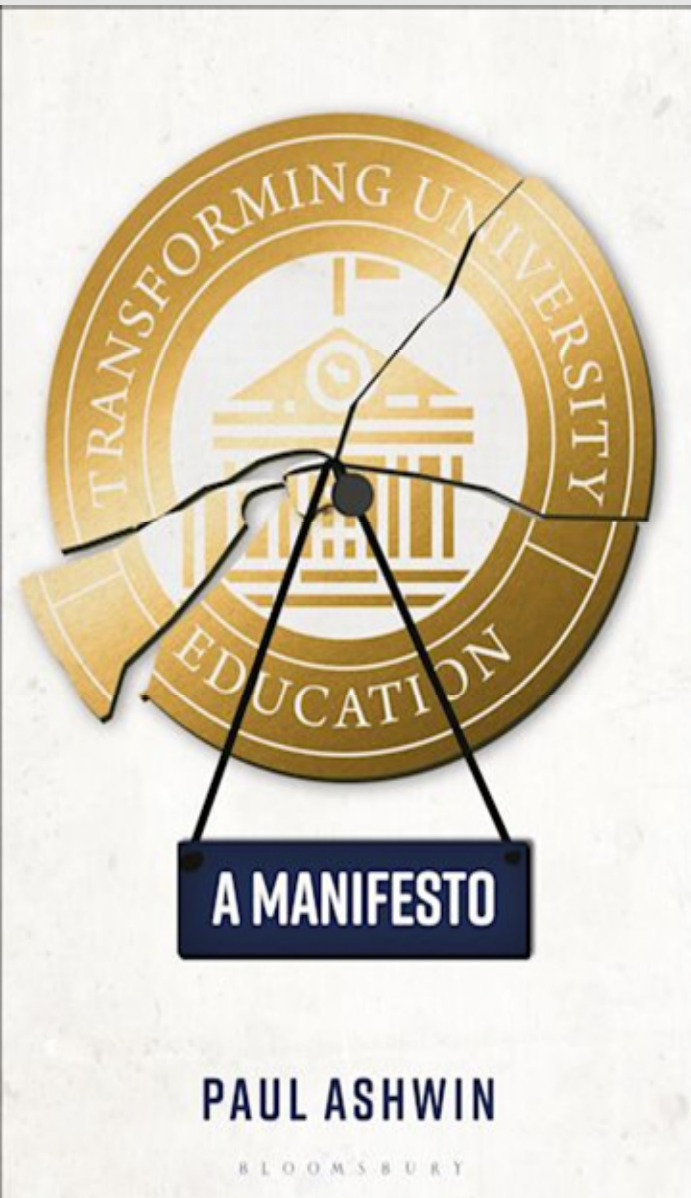
Economic arguments now dominate our thinking about the purpose and nature of a HE. We have lost a sense of the educational purposes of an undergraduate degree and have lost a clear sense of going to university as giving access to a HE.

(Ashwin, 2020: 9)

The educational purpose of a HE is to bring students into a **transformative relationship to knowledge that changes their sense of who they are and what they can do in the world.**

(Ashwin, 2020: 3)

But this is not a dichotomy (Ashwin *et al*, 2023)… important to emphasise how the knowledge students study in a degree connects to them to the world and helps them to achieve what they want to do in the future.

Making Education Better…

One problem with **causal assumptions** about education is that they have difficulty with giving a place to the agency of the actors involved in education and, more specifically with their **reflexive agency** i.e., that teachers and students can think and can act on the basis of their thoughts, judgements and decisions… we need to think differently about its operation, not as a quasi-causal mechanical reality that happens behind the backs of those involved but rather as a (complex) social reality constituted by the conscious acts of reflexive agents.

(Biesta, 2020: 38-39)

Self-formation emphasises **reflexive agency**, whereby students consciously monitor and develop themselves on an ongoing basis.

(Marginson, 2023b: 1)

HE Policy Making: Questions

England has no policy language for talking about outcomes of HE other than attenuated performative outputs such as graduate salaries, research impact, knowledge exchange, and widening participation, understood as individual access to education as a private good

- How to bring recognition of the **public good outcomes**, non-pecuniary individual benefits and collective relational benefits, back onto the agenda?

  (Marginson & Yang, 2023: 5 & 33)

- How might the discursive positioning of HE as a commodity and an individual human capital investment be constructively challenged and allied to a re-alignment of HE purposes?

- How might Social Identity Theory offer a possible conceptual counter-narrative to Human Capital Theory?

Marginson (2023b) positions education as a project of self-formation. As do we. Self is an intrinsically social/community concept

Building on Marginson (2023b)

We consider education as fundamentally an identity project

Marginson identifies the passive neo-liberal self (homo economicus in the guise of human capital theory and economic self-interest) and the proactive self-forming person.

We think that this distinction (i.e. between homo economicus and the proactive self) is not ontological - rather a function of distinct types of social identity

Furthermore:

We think that which self it is that is salient at every level of understanding in HE (e.g. homo economicus v proactive self) is a question that turns on how self and leadership are understood.

We argue that social identity is again central here

Rationale for focusing on Self: Marginson (2023b)

Argues that Higher Education is best understood in terms of self-formation

We understand self as a function of the group in the individual (or in Vygotskian terms that the intra psychological precedes the inter psychological) and that immersion in knowledge is a key aspect of this identity project. From a social identity perspective, Haslam (2017, p.19) argues that education and learning are the processes through which group life endures

We argue that the social identity approach affords HE researchers, HE leaders, and HE policy makers with a set of conceptual tools that facilitate both understanding and intervention
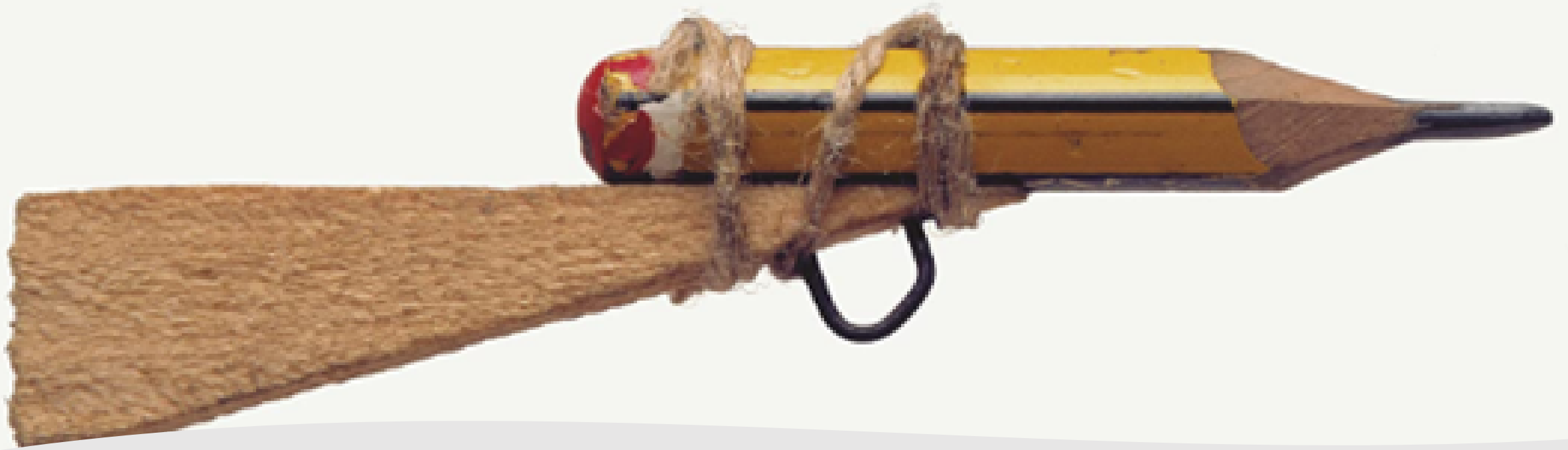
Conservative/individualistic/market driven approaches to education maintain the status quo

In contrast: Social Identity is a theory of social change

Change is always happening in any case: we are suggesting that change be managed in a manner geared towards civic society/public good

Social Identity Approach (SIA)

Metatheory incorporating:

- **Social Identity Theory (a theory of intergroup relations): who we are is a function of the groups that we belong to and that have emotional and value significance for us**

- **Self Categorisation Theory: predicts the circumstances when one will perceive people (including themselves) as belonging to a group;**

- **Also a focus on the consequences of perceiving people in group terms…**

5 Key-ways in which SIA bears on Educat

1. **SI = basis of learner engagement with instructors and instructional systems**

2. **SI informs how learners do this (e.g. Luria, Vyg & Uzbek studies)**

3. **Understanding consolidated through identity based educational interaction**

4. **SI = basis for mutual influence between learners and teachers**

5. **SI related ideology structures and defines key parameters of intra and inter group relations**

Independence (Marginson, 2023b: 3) and SIA

Independence is a function of the groups we belong to:

Reflexive graduates make their own values, meaning and purpose - but not in a vacuum.

This is part of group life: 'relational experiences of students beyond the classroom' (Marginson, 2023b: 3)

Marginson (2023b: 4) links relationality (as per Vygotsky) to self-formation in HE.

Haslam (2017) sees Vygotsky's ZPD as fundamental and an aspect of group membership

Vygotsky's theory is one of internalisation. The SIA argues that analysis should begin with the group in the individual rather than vice-versa. We argue that degree of immersion (which can be measured quantitatively) is a function of identification (Testable in future studies)
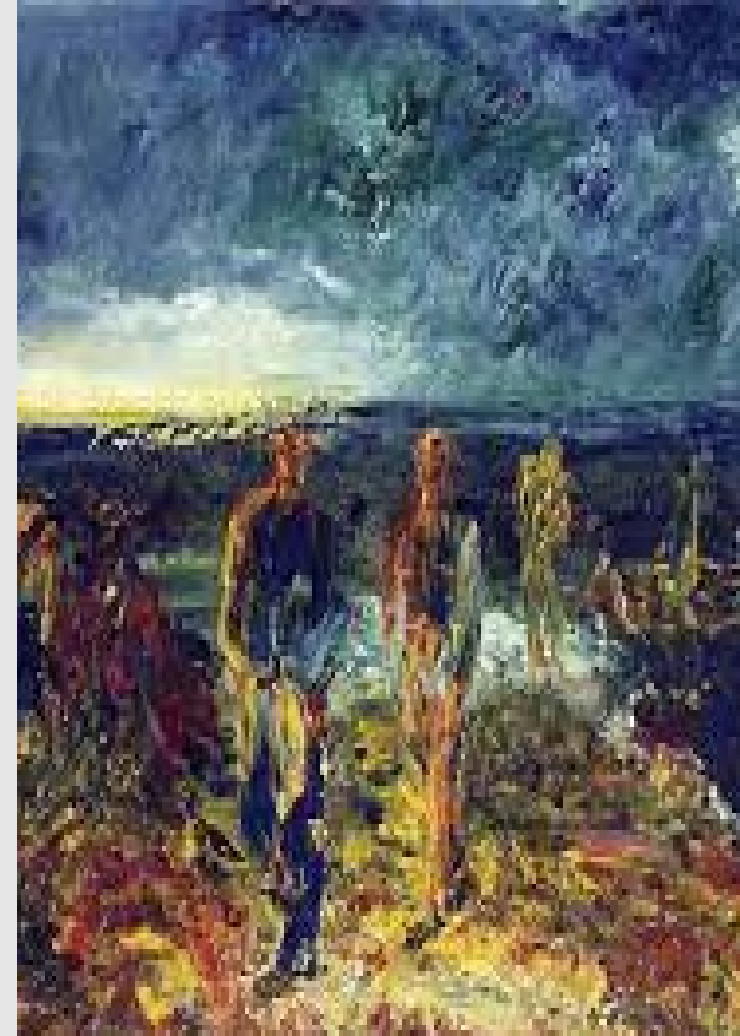
Cognitive Alternatives (Reicher and Haslam, 2012)

- **Social psychology is about making social change possible rather than unimaginable**

- **Leadership plays a key role in producing cognitive alternatives**

- **'People need to start thinking of themselves as group members…and they need to start thinking of their group as able to determine their own fate' (p.64)**

The alternative we are suggesting is the transformational approach advocated by Ashwin (2020) and others. THIS CHANGE CAN BE INCREMENTAL.

The SIA & Leadership in HE

'HE institutional managers rarely seek to reshape discourses, let alone to reshape policy'

(Jones, 2022: 226)

WE THINK THAT THE ONUS IS ON THOSE IN HE, LIKE US, TO MAKE THE CASE AND TO EXPLAIN THE BENEFITS TO HE LEADERS AND POLICY MAKERS (thanks to Prof Paul Ashwin)

Defining category content is what leaders do (e.g. Lincoln defining the category of American around the principles of liberty and equality)

Social identities are world making resources - they determine *what* people collaborate on and *how* people collaborate

Leaders are the personification of identity, and they can use their identities to mobilise others

Leaders are entrepreneurs of identity e.g. Boris Johnson as a man of the people v 'metropolitan elites'

Haslam (2017: 38)

"We are our choices."

– J.P. Sartre

..., policymakers debate whether students should be construed as employees-in-waiting (who therefore need to be given concrete skills for work) or as embryonic citizens (who therefore need to be given creative skills for citizenship; Maisuria, 2005). More generally, debate – and the *entrepreneurs of identity* who lead it (Reicher and Hopkins, 2001) – asks whether it is the student who is the 'customer' or the society in which they live and, even more fundamentally, whether educational activity should be framed by the mercantile language of economic exchange at all (Barnett, 2013; Collini, 2012; Molesworth, Scullion and Nixon, 2011). As Sonnenberg shows compellingly, these are choices that have profound implications not just for educational participants but also for the systems in which they are embedded.

3 R's for Developing Leadership

- **Reflecting (Observe & listen to the group in order to understand)**

- **Represent (Make sure actions reflect and advance the group values)**

- **Realize (i.e. deliver and be seen to deliver things that matter for the group)**

An Alternative Discourse for the Public Good

- In 1954, when the US Supreme Court ruled that segregated public schools were unconstitutional, Chief Justice Earl Warren emphasized the importance of public education as a crucible for good citizenship.

- "Today," Warren wrote, "education is perhaps the most important function of state and local governments. Compulsory school attendance laws and the great expenditures for education both demonstrate our recognition of the importance of education to our democratic society. It is required in the performance of our most basic public responsibilities, even service in the armed forces. It is the very foundation of good citizenship."

Future HE Scenarios

Citizenship:

'It is on the main theme we must concentrate - on the idea that education is the making of men *(sic)*, not training men to make things…The danger of technical education, Plato clearly saw, as many see today, is that a particular technique, or narrow scientific study tends to become an end in itself, cramping the mind of the student and limiting his vision to a point where he remains unaware that his technology and the machines which he makes, have become his master not his servant'

(Castle, 1961, p.102-103)

Future HE Scenarios (Haslam, 2017: 38)

the systems in which they are embedded. For example, if students are encouraged to see themselves as consumers rather than learners, and educators to see themselves as service providers rather than teachers, then this will tend to structure the content of the social identities that define their relationship in ways that undermine educational goals (e.g., by being focused more on satisfaction with service delivery than on self-extension). This, in turn, may have the effect of promoting discontent among students as well as discouraging them from feeling responsible for or being interested in their own intellectual development. Ironically, then, while the mindset associated with consumer identity is intended to empower students, it may ultimately mean that it undermines their capacity to take ownership of their own education and learning.

Conclusions

- We want to join the debate because we agree with Scott (2021: 168) that the reassertion of the public character of the university and its crucial, and critical role in maintaining an open society

- We think that the SIA, as a theory of social change, offers a way of understanding, and a set of leadership tools, appropriate to the task

- Immersion (Marginson, 2023b) + Social identity + Citizenship are measurable outcomes that can be harnessed to assess excellence. A cognitive alternative to the mercantile/consumerist discourse that presently dominates

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