Speech to conference on the purposes of higher education

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Simon Marginson

**[TITLE SLIDE: The intrinsic and extrinsic purposes of higher education]**

The topic of this conference, the purposes of higher education, is difficult to resolve. It goes to questions of what we do in higher education, and to our relations, autonomy and control. Who determines the purposes?

**[ARTS TOWER]**

In this paper I begin with the purposes and functions of higher education. I understand these in terms of cultural formation and social order, with the economic part of the social. I then focus on the core purposes in learning and knowledge, and move to the way the functions and purposes of the sector play out in the growth of participation and in government-higher education relations. I conclude by reflecting on the growing tensions between differing understandings and valuations of the purposes of higher education.

**[The reasoning]**

I will expand on these propositions. Many will agree about the multiple character of higher education and no single universal measure of value. The idea of higher education as a status good and the sector’s poor capability as a social equaliser may receive a more mixed reception. However, the main issue is in four and five. A valuation of higher education based on employability conflicts with the intrinsic educational purpose of higher education, which is cultural preparation via immersion in knowledge. This tension, which was long a normal operating condition, is now undermining the sector.

**[1. higher education is *essentially* complex and heterogeneous]**

First, multiplicity. Higher education has a vast range of purposes. These are often heterogenous, different in kind, and cannot be directly compared, let alone measured on a common scale.

**[This was Clark Kerr's point about the ‘multiversity’ in 1962]**

As Clark Kerr argued in the best book on the modern university, anticipating post-modernism, higher education is *inherently* heterogeneous:

* Multiple fields of irreducibly diverse knowledge
* Multiple social groups, interests and stakeholders
* Multiple types of outcome, multiple objectives, norms and values

**[If we adopt a realist viewpoint, no single value proposition can capture this complexity]**

The key point is not just multiplicity but heterogeneity. The university orchestra, research into malaria, and training students to model the futures market, are qualitatively different. When the multiple outcomes of higher education are reduced to one ideological purpose, such as national prosperity, or a single measure of value, as when graduate salaries are the ‘master’ measure of the individualised effects of higher education, this blocks everything else from view. This leads to policies that lack effective purchase on the sector but nonetheless tend to conceal and reduce its potentials.

**[2. Intrinsic and extrinsic purposes of higher education]**

So one starting point for understanding the purposes of higher education is to admit their complexity. What conceptual tools do we have for unpacking this complexity? I want to suggest two schemas.

**[The inner and outer dimensions of purpose]**

First, a fundamental distinction between two different kinds of purpose. The difference lies in the extent of external involvement in carrying out the purposes. The intrinsic or inner purposes can be wholly carried by agents within the institution. With the extrinsic purposes, agency is *shared* between agents within the institution and others outside the institution.

The *intrinsic purposes* are the classical core of higher education: the education of students; and the transmission, creation and dissemination of knowledge. Here are student learning for its own sake and knowledge for its own sake. These essentially cultural functions have shaped the distinctive internal organisation of the sector, and its reproduction. Teaching and learning, and scholarship and research, are grounded in epistemic disciplines, study programmes and departments/schools. Note that the two intrinsic purposes are closely intertwined. Learning is knowledge-intensive. The nexus between teaching and research nexus is a norm of academic identity and shapes academic work. The intrinsic activities are valued not by policy, economic markets or measures of social impact but by internal agents using tools such as exams, grading, peer review and academic judgments about quality.

The *extrinsic purposes* constitute the external social roles played by higher education, its institutions and agents. Unlike the intrinsic purposes, the extrinsic purposes are carried out through engagement with social partners, whether directly or with reference to their requirements. The social partners share in determining value. This extrinsic domain includes higher education’s role in forming and unequally allocating social *status*, its role in preparing students for *work*, the professions and occupations*,* and applications of higher education to such areas as industry innovation, and regional development.

Note that while the inner intrinsic purposes of higher education can be achieved without the extrinsic applications, the reverse is not true. The capacity of higher education institutions to fulfil their extrinsic purposes rests on their intrinsic capabilities in education and knowledge. That’s what I mean about the intrinsic *core*. Without it, there is no higher education as such.

**[There have been diverse kinds of higher education in history]**

In different times and places there have been several highly developed forms of higher education, long prior to Clark Kerr’s multiversity. These different types of higher education had varied extrinsic social functions, but they had essentially the same intrinsic functions.

China’s academies of higher learning, dating back to the Western Zhou, were established by the Imperial state and prepared a governing caste of scholar-officials through prolonged immersion in scholarship and the arts. The monasteries in Northern India, such as Vikramshila and Nalanda, began with religious devotion but expanded to develop a vast range of knowledge, drawing scholars from all over Asia. The leading ancient Greek centre was the Library and Mouseion at Alexandria, founded by Ptolemy II in 270 BCE, which housed not just teaching but scientific discovery. A thousand years later Islamic scholarship led the Mediterranean world. The educational mosques at Fez in Morocco and Al-Azhar at Cairo in Egypt, which are now designated universities, are the oldest higher education institutions with a continuous history. Then there was the medieval European university. It grew out of the church but was also a creature of the town and sometimes of the court, and extended its epistemic repertoire from theology to the many fields we know today.

**[*Every* form of higher education has had two core intrinsic purposes. These continue]**

Higher education was sometimes of state-driven, sometimes church-driven, and often partly or temporarily independent. But there was always two core intrinsic purposes. First, the cultural formation of persons as individuals and as social beings through teaching and learning. Second, scholarship and the reproduction of knowledge, and often also the creation of new knowledge. These functions have always been joined, with the formation of persons taking place via immersion in knowledge.

**[3. Biesta’s three functions of education]**

That’s the two kinds of purpose, intrinsic and extrinsic. Now let me introduce Gert Biesta’s three *functions* of education: qualification, socialisation and subjectification. Here we zoom in a bit, from the whole of the intrinsic and extrinsic domains, to focusing just on the education of students.

**[Qualification, socialisation, subjectification]**

*Qualification* means providing students/graduates with the knowledge, skills and understanding, and dispositions and forms of judgement, enabling them to ‘do something’ – ranging from specific training for a particular job or profession, or in a particular skill, to political literacy, and acquiring cultural knowledge that is socially practised. The qualification function, which as Biesta notes is often economic, is a principal reason for funding higher education.

*Socialisation*, in Biesta’s words, is ‘the many ways in which, through education, we become members of and part of particular social, cultural and political “orders”’. It includes both the open transmission of norms and values, and ‘hidden curricula’.

*Subjectification* refers to the ‘individuating’ effect of education, whereby students becoming self-realising subjects. ‘Any education worthy of its name should always contribute to processes of subjectification that allow those being educated to become more autonomous and independent in their thinking and acting’, states Biesta. Unlike socialisation, subjectification does not subordinate students to society. It can also be distinguished from objectification, for example graduates reified as units of economic value.

**[The two purposes and three functions together]**

Let’s put the two distinctions together: the intrinsic/extrinsic, and qualification, socialisation and subjectification. This helps to explain what higher education does. As noted, the focus here is the education of persons. Other purposes such as, say, academic contributions to government policy, are excluded.

Qualification mainly falls in the extrinsic domain because it typically involves social partners, such as employers and professions. Socialisation, which is about norms and social order, is shaped in both intrinsic knowledge and extrinsic social relations. Whereas subjectification, whereby higher education provides conditions for the evolution of students as independent reflexive people, happens mostly within higher education itself, inside and outside the classroom. Employers value graduate autonomy only up to a point – they prefer other-regulated personal autonomy to free self-regulated autonomy.

**[The two purposes and three functions (2)]**

In the public and policy discussions of purposes, functions and value in higher education, the emphasis is overwhelmingly concentrated on the qualification function in the extrinsic domain. This is where government, public media, employers and other stakeholders maximise their influence over the sector. Preparation for work tends to overshadow other kinds of qualification.

**[The two purposes and three functions (3)]**

At the other extreme of the extrinsic/intrinsic spectrum, the subjectification function is concentrated in the intrinsic core of teaching and learning immersed in knowledge. Here the academic professional, and students themselves, are in command, rather than external stakeholders. There is a long history of the subjectification and socialisation functions in educational philosophy, from Confucian learning to Kant and Bildung in Germany, JH Newman, John Dewey and the American pragmatists.

**[when *cultural* processes are remade as *economic* training, subjectification and socialisation become marginalised]**

The intrinsic subjectification function is central to the lifelong benefits that students gain from higher education, to their personal agency and capability in shaping their lives. However, economically-minded governments scarcely notice this function. Economic policy models the student as a consumer and self-investor and defines the graduate in extrinsic economic terms as a unit of human capital with a market value. This forces the square peg of higher education into a round economic hole for which it is unfitted. The intrinsic purposes, where higher education commands itself, where it has a unique role as a sector, and does its core work – work in which the roles of government and employers are relatively weak - are little acknowledged.

**[Subjectification as self-formation offers more to students]**

Yet in contemporary societies the reflexive self-realising individual, consciously shaping persona and life trajectory, is the central figure. It’s a longer discussion than we have time for today, but this has changed the ground on which higher education takes place. It suggests the need to rework subjectification as *student self-formation*. Here higher education is understood not as other-formation by teachers, but as self-monitoring and self-propelled learning by students, hard work to be sure, where the teacher is not the driver but the guide to the immersion in knowledge in which self-formation takes place.

**[Student self-making grounded in reflexive agency]**

At best, education enables people to transform themselves through the never-ending work of the self on the self. When this happens higher education is fundamentally empowering. I’m sure many in this room have been touched in that way. Higher education as intrinsic self-formation offers students much more than higher education as extrinsically regulated consumption.

Self-formation is a continuing process of personal enlargement. The essential elements are the autonomy of the learner, reflexive agency and the will to learn. What distinguishes self-formation in higher education from other self-formation is primarily the immersion in knowledge, and also, secondarily, for students not stymied by paid work, immersion in social relations and projects.

**[4. Higher education is very effective in creating, calibrating and distributing extrinsic social status]**

So that’s the intrinsic and extrinsic purposes, and the three functions of education. Now I will move to three prominent extrinsic puposes, the first two in the sphere of qualification: higher education’s role in generating and differentiating social status, preparation for work and occupations, and innovation in Industry.

**[higher education has survived and expanded throughout the 935 year history of the Euro-American university because …]**

How has higher education survived and grown across three thousand years? Because it generates employable human capital? The library in Athens and Nalanda in India lacked a Gary Becker. Because it generates economically valuable knowledge? Nineteenth century Johns Hopkins, creating the first American research university, was not especially driven by the search for commercialisable technology. Because it creates more equal societies? No, higher education has never done that.

**[The university - which formed people through immersion in knowledge -]**

I think the key to higher education’s long survival and growth is its role in shaping and allocating forms of social distinction or *status*. This was its exact function in the Imperial academies in China, and it continues. Further, the key to its expansion, to more than half the school leaver age group in 70 or so countries, is that it provides an opportunity structure in which status can be accessed that is both freely expandable, and more legitimate than other ways of ordering social outcomes such as blood and kinship, race, gender, religion, geographical origin, residence, and wealth. These other distinctions still matter and shape people’s lives but instead of operating directly as tools of status allocation they are modulated and re-expressed within educational distinctions: between the educated and uneducated, and between thew different levels of education, fields of study, languages of instruction, institutions within institutional hierarchies, and countries of study.

**[The universal desire for social betterment through status and material improvement]**

Adam Smith said: ’The desire of bettering our condition ... comes with us from the womb and never leaves us till we go into the grave’. Here personal dignity, social recognition, and material advancement, overlap with each other.

The orthodox explanation for the growth of higher education is that expanding economic demand for skills drives both the provision of extra student places and family demand for those places. But in the last sixty years there has been little correlation between the general and specific expansion of skilled work and the growth of participation. Educational growth is inexorable, common to every kind of economy once national wealth reaches a minimum threshold. Governments never reduce the participation rate, they only preside over its growth. Over time governments respond to pressure from below, popular demand for opportunities, which are opportunities for personal betterment.

Demand for higher education is rooted in desires for recognised credentials, social respect and larger earnings (which go to the extrinsic purposes), and desires for self-efficacy and empowerment (which go to intrinsic purpose of subjectification). There is more certainty about higher education’s role in conferring status than in augmenting earnings. While students and families *want* higher education to augment earnings, there are no guarantees in the graduate labour market. But they *know* that higher education will lift their status above the status of those who do not enter. As participation grows, lack of higher education is increasingly associated with *diminished* status. As Martin Trow noted out in 1973 this drives further expansion towards universality.

**[Status holds the multiversity together – in several ways]**

The extrinsic function of status allocation rests on the intrinsic function of education immersed in knowledge, in institutions organised by the teaching/research nexus. The intrinsic cultural engine provides tools for the creation, calibration and distribution of social status – readily differentiating knowledge and qualifications, rank ordering persons and institutions. Because status is accessed through individual educational-cultural formation, it is not just attached to the graduate’s social persona, it becomes installed in the inner self through subjectification. Remarkably, the intrinsic cultural engine, with its ancient roots, has been scaled up to the level of half the population.

At the same time, the institutions that engineer and calibrate individual status, pursue a second form of status – institutional status. Rankings, the World-Class University movement and the growing stratification in many systems are manifestations of this. Differentiation between universities in their status value refracts back into the workings of the inner cultural engine. Some knowledge has more status, and status making power. High status universities confer larger status on graduates and are a magnet for families that see higher education as a path to self-betterment. Leading universities seek resources not as profit or capital per se, but to hold or improve their status.

**[in short, higher education is most basically: Education + knowledge + social status]**

Yet the three elements in the equation are partly hidden. Formative education and knowledge, are rarely discussed as such in policy-making circles; except when research is seen as economically valuable. Social status as such is *never* discussed. It is the desire that people dare not name. But everybody wants it!

**[The social power of the top universities = status + resources + talent + knowledge (science)]**

This provides clues as to what makes the leading universities tick. Knowledge is not just a component of educational formation. As global science with its central role in determining rankings, knowledge drives institutional status and hence is both a direct and an indirect driver of resources. Meanwhile the status and resources of leading universities draw the top researchers who drive science: it is circular. For high scoring students, the leading universities offer superior resources, educational experience and self-formation, but above all the status of the institution, from which they will draw individual status. There is another circular flow. Students who are academically and socially elite augment the status and often also resource power in the leading universities. Demand from high scoring students intensifies selectivity and this further lifts institutional status. Shape-shifting status is at the centre of the social power and institutional reproduction of the elite universities.

**[Higher education is better at social differentiation than social equity]**

However, the many-sided reliance of higher education on social status, as driver of growth and popular consent and means of calibrating value and ordering the sector, makes the sector strategically vulnerable.

As discussed, the allocation of social status via cultural formation in knowledge is more legitimating than would be the open determination of status on the basis of wealth and other personal advantage. It is also more acceptable than the allocation of status simply on the basis of institution attended within the hierarchy of universities. Yet cultural formation via knowledge allows both of these methods to operate under the radar, even while it renders and represents status allocation as the outcome of individual effort and merit. Higher education protects its internal inequalities. Yet status differentiation sustains the impression that even massified systems are elitist, while enhancing frustrations when graduates cannot readily access ‘graduate jobs’.

Hence despite its tendency to expansion, higher education is only partly good at social inclusion. Status differentiation on the basis of cultural formation creates an under-educated underclass increasingly excluded from social esteem, parity of agency and full effective citizenship. And from the combination of stratification with incomplete inclusion, it follows logically that higher education is poor at social equalisation. The last sixty years of equality of opportunity policies have seen no improvement in the social distribution of high value university places, even in Nordic countries where the principle of social equality is deeply felt. In many countries equality of opportunity has deteriorated as systems have grown. This does not mean we should not press for equity – if we don’t do this continually the outcomes will worsen – but it points to limits in what higher education alone can achieve.

In short, higher education’s status and stratification function, its direct creation of inequality, is more robust than its capacity to create a flatter society. This constantly undermines its social and political base. It means that if a populist government wants to do it, it can readily mobilise resentment of higher education. The fuel is bone dry, always vulnerable to the match.

**[5. Higher education is less effective in the extrinsic purpose of vocational preparation: it is essentially different to work]**

The more immediate problem lies in the difference in the purposes of education between intrinsic cultural formation and the extrinsic preparation for work. The difference was always there, part of higher education’s multiplicity of roles, but has been intensified by economic policy’s elevation of employability to the master purpose and universal determinant of value.

**[Higher education and work: different worlds, challenging transition**

Studies confirm that most students have multiple objectives in higher education. They want personal development, *and* immersion in disciplinary knowledge, *and* they want graduate jobs. It’s not either/or. Many students are involved in work as well as education during the years of study.

But nor should we blur the distinctions between education and employment. They are different worlds. Agentic positioning, objectives, values, knowledges and skills, and required behaviours, are different. Efficient training in skills and employability occurs in the job. Accepting the fact of heterogeneity is the first step in improving transitions and combinations between education and work.

Intrinsic learning in higher education is foundational to graduate work, because it augments student agency, and provides specific knowledges and pre-vocational skills that help later with learning on the job. But direct vocational preparation is secondary and mostly postponed till after graduation. Though it is pursued in programmes of work experience or internship, and in job-search skills, these are add-ons to the intrinsic learning. Even in many occupational courses, transition to the workplace is challenging and takes time. Higher education and work are best understood as loosely coupled.

The relation between higher education and work is not a linear flow, and to press education and work into a single process – either by treating them as essentially the same, or subordinating one to the other - is to violate either work, or higher education. No prizes for guessing which is more vulnerable.

**[Our problem is the gulf that has opened up between]**

Our problem is the gulf that has opened up between the intrinsic educational function and the vocational expectations of policy and the media. Economic policy expects graduates who will augment productivity and growth. It was not necessary to place the intrinsic educational purposes in conflict with this extrinsic role, or to present vocational skills and academic knowledge as zero-sum. But the heterogeneity of purpose makes conflict possible, and within the two purposes, economic policy demands conformity with only one.

**[Policy now wants to install the extrinsic human capital imaginary *inside* the educational purpose]**

In UK and Australia, and some other countries, policy makers are making firm attempts to install the human capital imaginary, the extrinsic job preparation function, *inside* the intrinsic educational purpose. In UK the Teaching Excellence Framework sought to evaluate and measure *teaching and learning* in terms of graduate earnings, and student satisfaction in consumer surveys. The notion of ‘low value courses’ has taken hold: programmes associated with relatively low average graduate salaries. This means ignoring all the other factors that shape earnings, and ignoring the rationales for those programmes in self-formation, socialisation and the public good (e.g. nursing). Australia has ‘job ready graduates’ and micro credentials but the transition to work can only be shortened by truncating intrinsic education. Above all, ‘employability’ is the new universal extrinsic purpose by which intrinsic education is to be judged. This could be fatal for the cultural practice of higher education as a field of heterogenous knowledges focused on the formation of autonomous persons.

**[‘Employability’ is obstensibly designed for students but is profoundly detrimental]**

But economic policy does not see education in the form of personal formation in knowledge as optimal for productivity and growth. Policy wants to rework the purposes of higher education by pushing the sphere of work back into education and measuring education in the same economic terms as work.

Some believe we can tick all the boxes: epistemic engagement, personal development, *and* oven ready vocational preparation. That we can square human capital theory with *Bildung*. But they should be alive to the danger. Positioning employability as the universal measure of value is perverse for students. Instead of them being supported as self-forming autonomous learners working for the highest level of personal achievement, they are made into satisfied or unsatisfied consumers choosing between university brands.

**[6. There is also poor *direct* fit between research in higher education and industry innovation]**

There is also a poor direct fit between the intrinsic practices of scholarship and research and government’s extrinsic expectations about industry innovation.

**[Intrinsic science is not a linear ‘cause’ of extrinsic innovation]**

Higher education has many active relations with industry. It conducts applied research, and indirectly builds industry capacity by training researchers, and linking to global developments in science and technology. However, science and innovation are different. Universities focus on capacity and performance in science, and are marginal to the capital flows and risk taking driving innovation in industry. Many in government want higher education to focus on research that industry wants and see no value in any other kind of knowledge. Industry can fund research, they say. Yet science is a public good subject to market failure and in most countries is largely funded by governments.

**[The unacknowledged ‘leakage’ in national R&D systems]**

Some in government imagine that investing in university research fosters innovation in national industry. They are continually disappointed. Lack of linear fit between national science and industry is to be expected. Science is not a creature of nations. Scientific knowledge forms a single global pool, while R&D policy is nation-bound. Breakthroughs in national science are mostly taken up first by foreign firms – consider solar cells. Moreover, national industry sources most of its own innovations from foreign science in the global pool, not national science. After decades of science policy all this should be obvious. But apparently not. The lack of congruence between government and higher education fosters mistrust and destabilises science.

**[Conclusions]**

There is a growing tension between government’s economic imaginary of the purposes of higher education, and the purposes that are practised. This shows itself in relation to both innovation and employability.

**[Economic policy and higher education are at cross purposes]**

If government set out to design higher education focused on employable graduates we can be sure that is would not use cultural formation, academic knowledge and the teaching/research nexus! However, higher education is what it is. When government pushes the existing system towards the ideal economic model this cannot lead to results that satisfy anyone. What it does do is make higher education’s work in socialisation and subjectification via knowledge look very ‘ivory tower’. It also makes higher education responsible for economic outcomes it cannot control.

With economic policy and academic faculty at cross-purposes on an ongoing basis, trust between government and higher education is being poisoned.

**[What will be the purposes of the sector in future?]**

The purposes of higher education are multiple and heterogeneous. We know that policies based on single measures of value are damaging; for example, pushing the intrinsic functions of higher education in education, knowledge and research into narrow containers marked ‘employability’ and ‘innovation’. Higher education is not very effective in direct preparation for work but the mantra of employability blocks from view the educational process of student self-formation. It also creates unachievable expectations.

Will higher education continue to educate students as self-realising agents via immersion in knowledge, as it has for three thousand years? Or will it be forced to focus solely on employability, or perhaps employability plus status and stratification? Will its autonomy, and heterogeneity, survive?