THE PURPOSES OF HIGHER EDUCATION:
AN EMERGING EXISTENTIAL CRISIS

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CGHE East Asia researchers, 19-21 March 2023
Introduction: Multiplicity

Two kinds of purpose, three functions

The intrinsic core of the sector

Extrinsic purpose 1
Social status

Extrinsic purpose 2
Employment

Conclusion: our problem

University of Bologna, Italy (1088 CE)
THE REASONING

1. Higher education houses multiple heterogeneous activities and cannot be reduced to a single value proposition

2. The intrinsic purposes of higher education are self-reproducing learning/knowledge/research. This intrinsic core is deployed for a range of extrinsic social purposes

3. Biesta's (2009) three functions of education are helpful in unpacking the intrinsic and extrinsic purposes

4. Higher education is very effective in the extrinsic purpose of creating, calibrating and distributing social status

5. It is less directly effective in the extrinsic purpose of preparation for work (educational-cultural preparation through immersion in knowledge, and work, are different);

6. But government and public media increasingly treat immediate employability as the 'master purpose'
I. HIGHER EDUCATION IS ESSENTIALLY COMPLEX AND HETEROGENEOUS
Reducing the multiple outcomes of higher education to a single purpose or single measure of value blocks from view most of what’s actually there.

A single value proposition (e.g. graduate salaries as the ‘master’ measure of value for individuals) can only be *ideological*. 

If we adopt a realist perspective, no single value proposition can capture this complexity.
2. INTRINSIC AND EXTRINSIC PURPOSES OF HIGHER EDUCATION
INNER AND OUTER PURPOSES OF HIGHER EDUCATION

• The **intrinsic purposes** are the classical inner core of higher education, where value is judged on academic grounds
  - education of students
  - transmission, creation, dissemination of knowledge

• The **extrinsic purposes** are the external social roles of higher education, carried out in partnership with other social agents, who share judgments about value
  - this includes the allocation of **status** through higher education, and the preparation of students in **work**, the professions and occupations

Rene Magritte, *The human condition*, 1935
THERE HAVE BEEN DIVERSE FORMS OF HIGHER EDUCATION IN HISTORY

- China’s Imperial academies, training scholars in statecraft, began in Western Zhou (1046-771 BCE)
- The great scholarly monasteries of Northern India
- Library and Mouseion at Alexandria, 270 BCE
- The golden age of Islamic scholarship, 7th-13th CE
- Medieval European universities, Bologna 1088 CE
- Von Humboldt’s teaching/research university in Berlin 1809 CE, followed by the comprehensive US science university that has now spread everywhere

University of Al-Qarawiyyin (Fez, Morocco) founded 859 CE
EVERY KIND OF HIGHER EDUCATION HAS HAD TWO CORE INTRINSIC PURPOSES, WHICH CONTINUE INTO THE PRESENT

• The educational formation of students as persons and social agents
• The reproduction (and also often the creation) of knowledge through scholarship and inquiry

University of Cambridge, UK
QUALIFICATION, SOCIALISATION, SUBJECTIFICATION


• **Qualification**: providing the knowledge, skills understanding, dispositions and judgements that enable students/graduates to ‘do something’

• **Socialisation**: ‘The many ways in which, through education, we become members of and part of particular social, cultural and political “orders”’

• **Subjectification**: The ‘individuating’ effects of education, whereby students become autonomous and self-realising subjects
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Economic policy defines the purposes of higher education in terms of extrinsic value defined in economic terms, pushing the intrinsic educational activities to conform, and hiding from view the other functions.
Higher education through immersion in knowledge enables people to transform themselves through the never-ending work of the self on the self, as in Confucian self-cultivation, and the Bildung idea, JH Newman and John Dewey.

Higher education as intrinsic self-formation offers students much more than higher education as extrinsic consumption.

‘Life isn’t about finding yourself. Life is about creating yourself, and creating things’

– Bob Dylan, Nobel Prize for literature 2016

4. Higher education is very effective in the extrinsic purpose of creating, calibrating and distributing social status
THE UNIVERSITY - WHICH FORMED PEOPLE THROUGH IMMERSION IN KNOWLEDGE -

- developed the extrinsic function of producing and allocating social opportunity and status, a primary aspect of the qualification function,
- and of sorting and differentiating populations,
- and hence became the common and increasingly universal focus of aspirations

STATUS ALLOCATION SUSTAINS THE TEACHING/RESEARCH UNIVERSITY MODEL

• Cultural-educational formation within teaching/knowledge institutions has long been joined to higher education’s role in producing and allocating individual status

• The universities that engineer and calibrate individual status themselves pursue a second form of status, institutional status, which regulates the differential distribution of status to persons
HIGHER EDUCATION IS, MOST BASICALLY
EDUCATION + KNOWLEDGE + SOCIAL STATUS

But higher education is good at social differentiation, half good at social inclusion and therefore not good at social equalisation. This sustains the impression that even massified systems are elitist, and also enhances frustrations when graduates cannot readily access ‘graduate jobs’ with status.
5. Higher education is less directly effective in vocational preparation, another of its qualification functions: it is different to work.
Many students want personal development, and immersion in disciplinary knowledge, and they want to be employable. Again we see that higher education fulfils multiple purposes

While higher education and work co-exist in the lives of many, these intrinsic and extrinsic domains are heterogeneous. Agentic positioning, objectives, values, knowledges and skills, and the required behaviours, are all very different

The graduate transition to work is often challenging and protracted, there’s no ‘quick fix’

THERE IS A PROFOUNDED DIFFERENCE BETWEEN

- the **intrinsic educational function** of higher education in culturally preparing students as autonomous persons, via immersion in knowledges, and

- **extrinsic policy expectations** that it creates employable graduates who augment productivity and growth

- This is becoming an ‘antagonistic contradiction’
6. GOVERNMENT AND PUBLIC MEDIA INCREASINGLY TREAT IMMEDIATE EMPLOYABILITY AS THE ’MASTER PURPOSE’
’EMPLOYABILITY’ IS AN IDEOLOGY DESIGNED TO TRANSFORM THE PURPOSES OF HIGHER EDUCATION

• In policy and public debate – and in research on higher education – ‘employability’ is the new universal, the goal of every higher education programme. Yet learning in higher education is immersion in knowledge, not work, and higher education cannot create jobs

• In UK the TEF judges the quality of the intrinsic education function in terms of graduate salaries. ‘Low value courses’ are vulnerable to enrolment reductions

• In Australia government wants ‘job ready graduates’
GOVERNMENT AND HIGHER EDUCATION ARE AT CROSS PURPOSES

• Policy now wants to install the extrinsic human capital imaginary *inside* the educational-cultural purpose

• If government set out to design higher education focused on employable graduates it would not use cultural formation, academic knowledge and the teaching/research nexus! But imposing employability on the existing system cannot work

• Higher education has been made responsible for economic outcomes that it cannot control

• Government trust of higher education is being poisoned
• The core intrinsic purposes of higher education are education and knowledge/research. Socialisation and subjectification are fundamental to higher education as it has evolved

• The primacy of extrinsic employability, measured by labour market outcomes, blocks student self-formation from view and creates unachievable expectations. Will higher education sustain its purposes? Or will it focus just on employability, or employability plus status and stratification?