





# 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



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# 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'

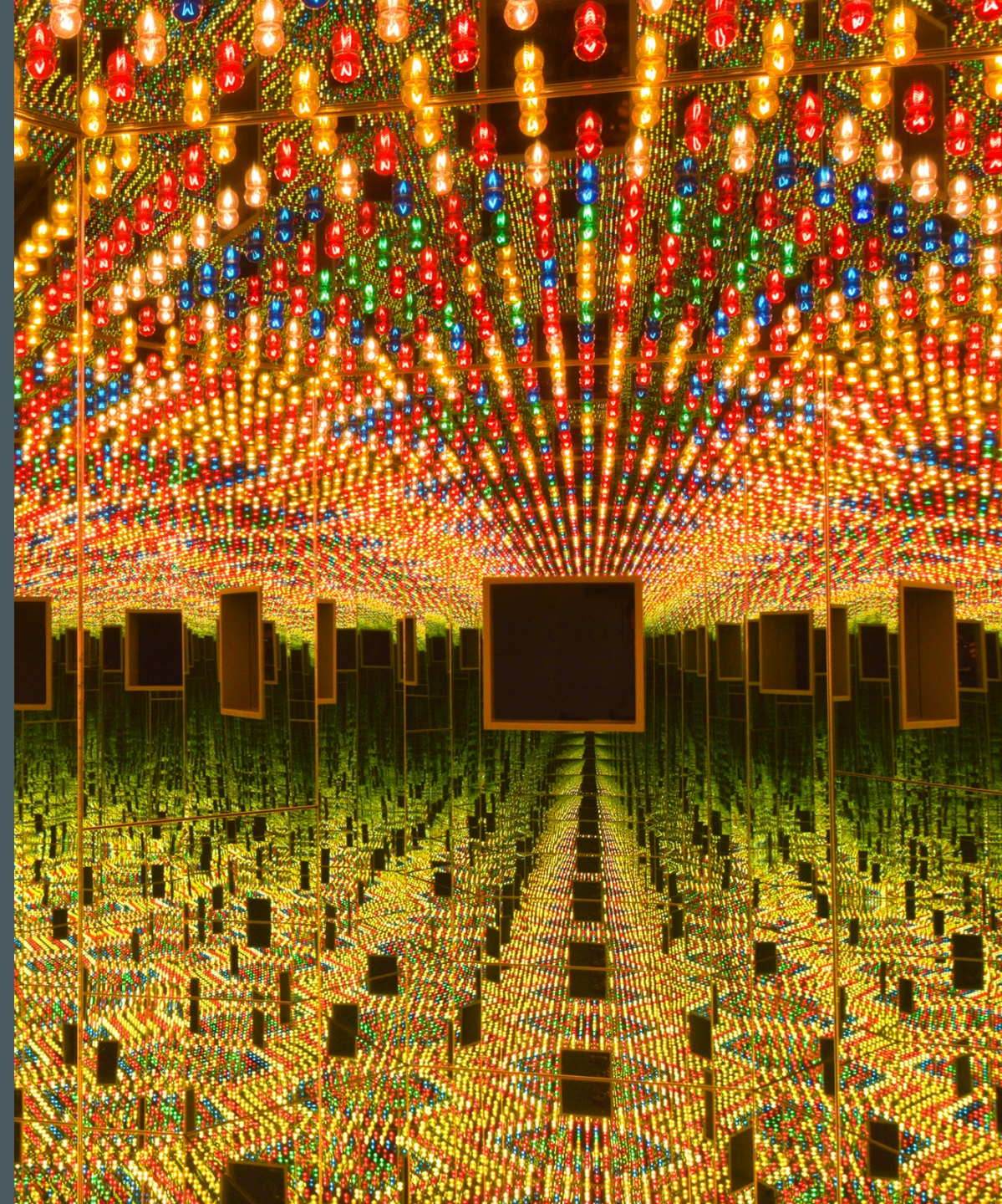
A lush, dense tropical rainforest scene with various green plants, trees, and vines. The background is filled with sunlight filtering through the canopy. A semi-transparent blue rectangular box with a white border is centered in the upper half of the image, containing white text.

I. HIGHER EDUCATION IS *ESSENTIALLY*  
COMPLEX AND HETEROGENEOUS

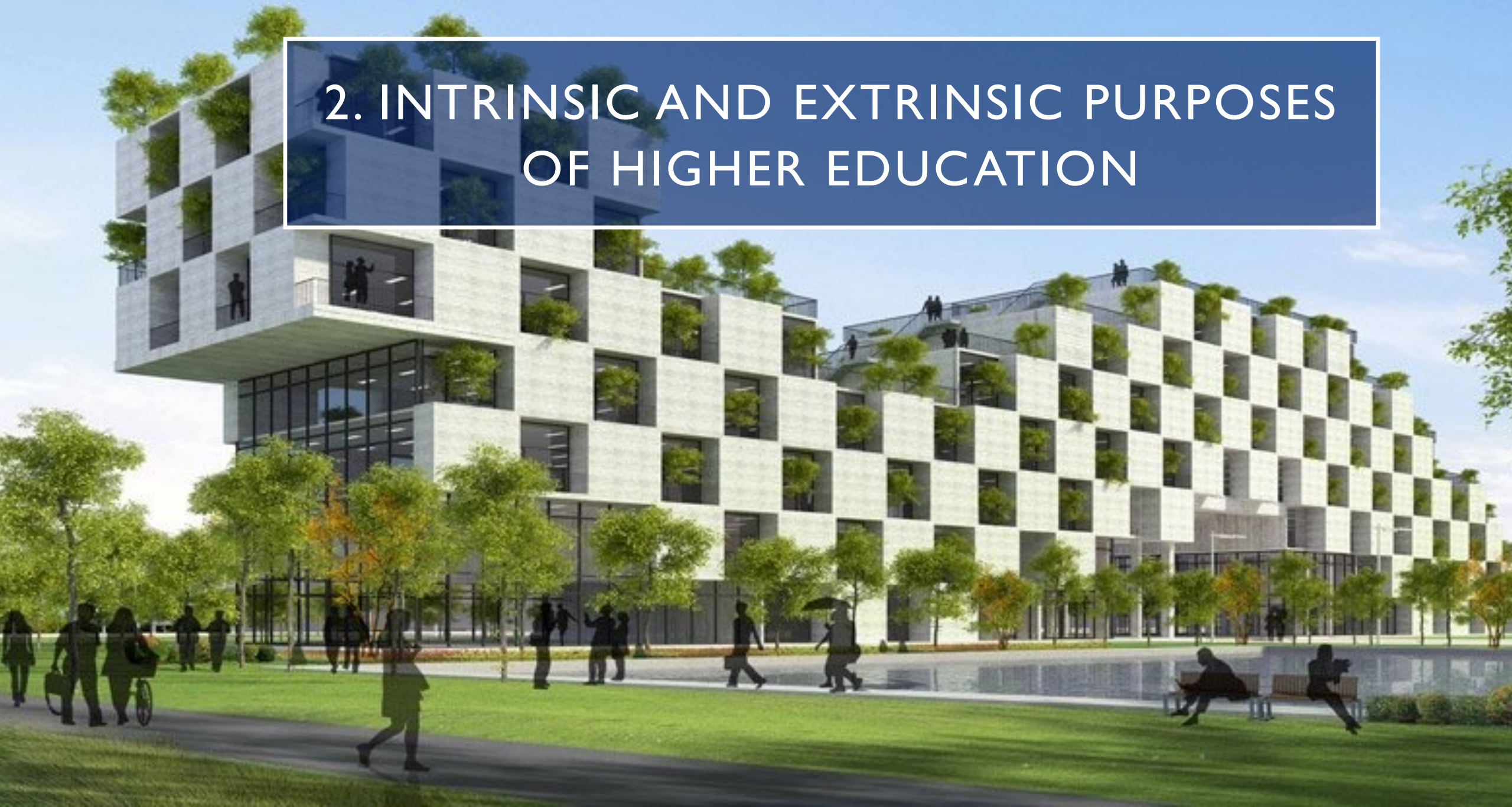
IF WE ADOPT A REALIST  
PERSPECTIVE, NO SINGLE  
VALUE PROPOSITION CAN  
CAPTURE THIS COMPLEXITY

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*



## 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, 7<sup>th</sup>-13<sup>th</sup> 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



# 3. BIESTA'S (2009) THREE FUNCTIONS OF EDUCATION



$\sin(x+y) = \sin x \cos y + \sin y \cos x$   $(\ln(x))' = x^{-1}$   $\frac{a}{\sin A} = \frac{b}{\sin B}$   $\sin \alpha = 0,5$   $\int \frac{dx}{\sqrt{x^2+a^2}} = \ln|x|$

$3+2i$   $(1+x)^d = 1 + \sum_{n=1}^{\infty} \binom{d}{n} x^n$   $\frac{a}{\sin A} = \frac{b}{\sin B}$   $e^{i\pi} + 1 = 0$

$\text{Im}$   $\text{Re} \binom{d}{n} = C_n^d$   $\frac{d!}{(n!) \alpha!} = \dots$   $\sin^2 \alpha + \cos^2 \alpha = 1$

$+f(x_{n-1})\Delta x$   $x \in (-\infty; -2)$   $(e^x)' = e^x$   $\lim_{x \rightarrow 0} \frac{\sin x}{x} = 1$

$a^2 = b^2 + c^2 - 2bc \cos A$   $y = \sin x$   $\begin{pmatrix} a_1 & b_1 \\ a_2 & b_2 \end{pmatrix} \cdot \begin{pmatrix} c_1 \\ c_2 \end{pmatrix} = \begin{pmatrix} a_1 c_1 + b_1 c_2 \\ a_2 c_1 + b_2 c_2 \end{pmatrix}$

$\frac{1}{2^n} = 2$   $e^x = 1 + \sum_{n=1}^{\infty} \frac{x^n}{n!}$   $D = b^2 - 4ac$

$\sin x = \text{Im}\{e^{ix}\}$   $\cosh(x) = \frac{e^x + e^{-x}}{2}$

$X = 1$   $\log_a^p x = \frac{1}{p} \log_a x$

$X! = 1 \cdot 2 \cdot \dots \cdot X$   $\lim_{n \rightarrow \infty} \left(1 + \frac{1}{n}\right)^n = e$

$a \cap b = \emptyset$   $\cos 2\alpha = 2 \cos \alpha$

$\text{tg} \alpha = \frac{\sin \alpha}{\cos \alpha}$   $\sqrt[n]{x_1 x_2 \dots x_n} \leq \frac{x_1 + x_2 + \dots + x_n}{n}$   $f^{(k)}(a)$

# QUALIFICATION, SOCIALISATION, SUBJECTIFICATION

Biesta, G. (2009). Good education in an age of measurement: On the need to reconnect with the question of purpose in education. *Educational Assessment, Evaluation and Accountability*, 21: 33–46. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11092-008-9064-9>

- **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



# THE TWO PURPOSES AND THREE FUNCTIONS TOGETHER

<b>Biesta (2009) function</b> (understood as student learning)	<b>Intrinsic purposes:</b> (a) teaching and learning; and (b) knowledge creation, transmission and dissemination	<b>Extrinsic purposes:</b> Shared by higher education and social partners, e.g. law curriculum and certification; applied research
<b>Qualification:</b> learning to do things	SECONDARY The intrinsic core is foundational but not generator of qualification	PRIMARY Qualification is largely realised in relations with social partners
<b>Socialisation:</b> ordering students in terms of external norms and values	PRIMARY Teaching, knowledges contribute to socialisation	SECONDARY Relations with social partners also contribute to socialisation
<b>Subjectification:</b> becoming an autonomous self-realising person	PRIMARY Subjectification in knowledge-intensive learning and sociability	MINOR Social partners want regulated not self-determining autonomy

# THE TWO PURPOSES AND THREE FUNCTIONS (2)

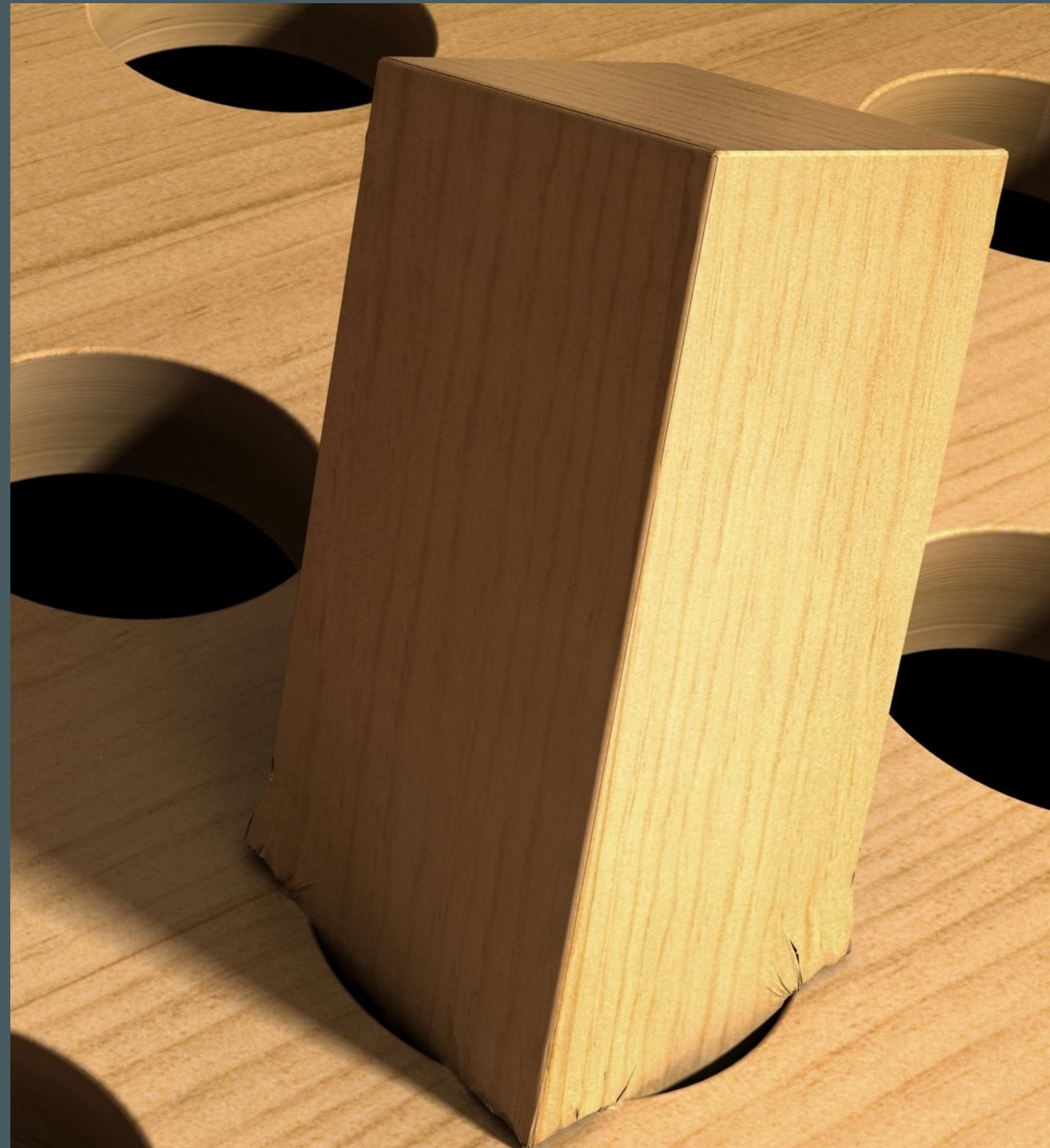
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WHEN *CULTURAL*  
PROCESSES ARE REMADE  
AS *ECONOMIC* TRAINING,  
SUBJECTIFICATION AND  
SOCIALISATION ARE  
MARGINALISED

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





# SUBJECTIFICATION AS STUDENT SELF-FORMATION OFFERS MORE TO STUDENTS

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

Cantwell, B., Marginson S. & Smolentseva, A. (eds.).(2018). *High participation systems of higher education*. Oxford: Oxford University Press



# 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

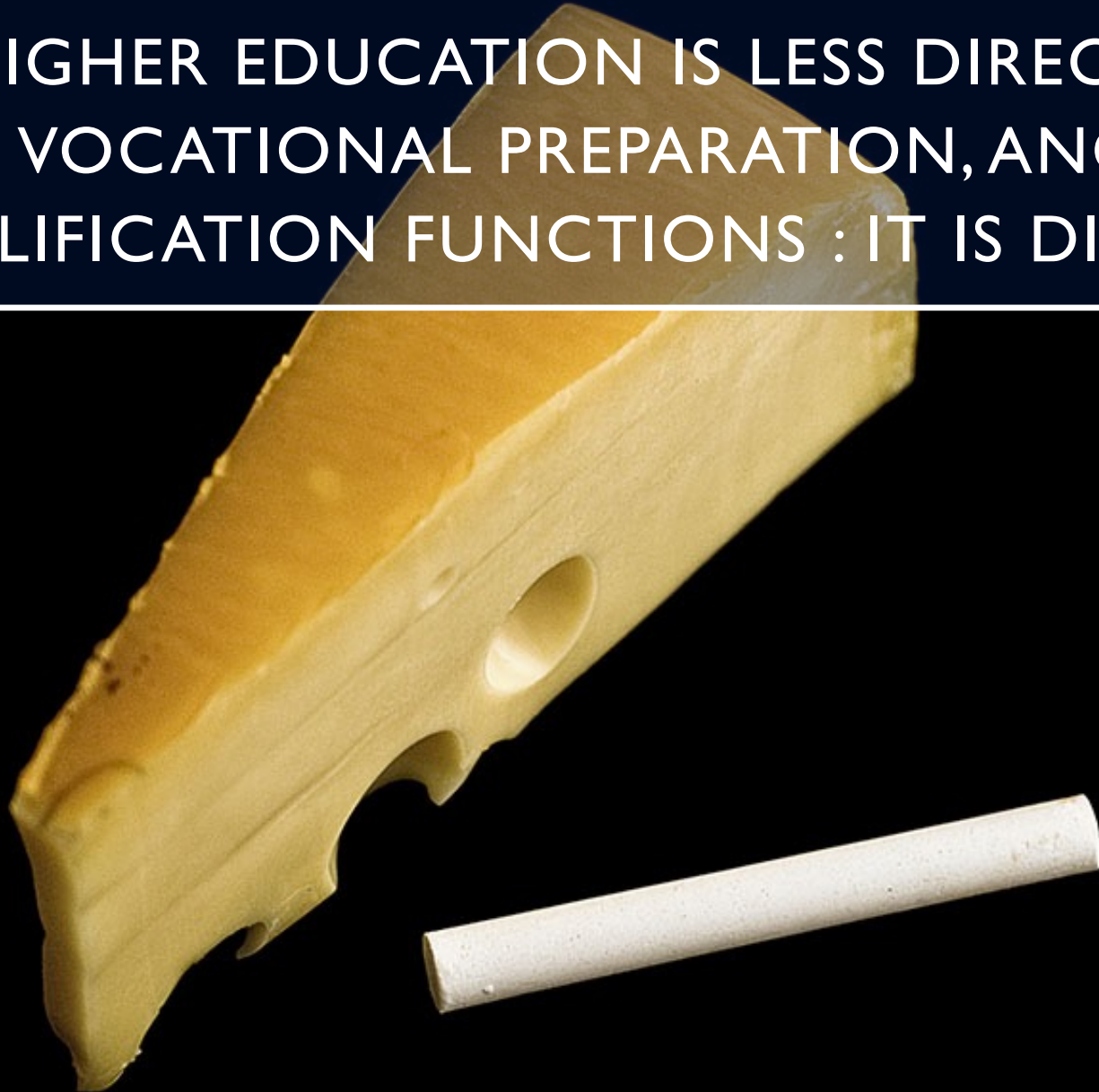


HIGHER EDUCATION IS, MOST BASICALLY  
**EDUCATION + KNOWLEDGE + SOCIAL STATUS**



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



# HIGHER EDUCATION AND WORK: DIFFERENT WORLDS

- 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 PROFOUND 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’



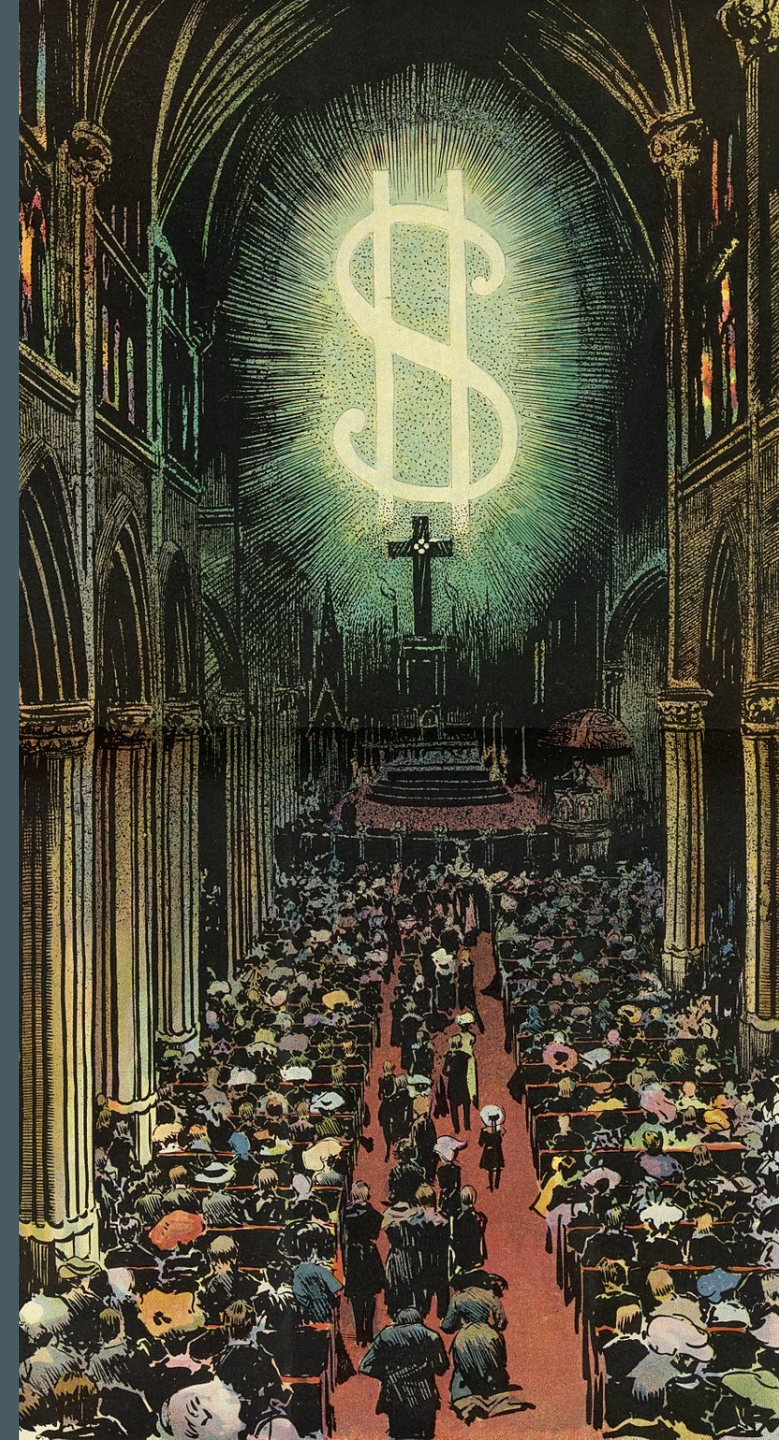


## 6. GOVERNMENT AND PUBLIC MEDIA INCREASINGLY TREAT IMMEDIATE EMPLOYABILITY AS THE 'MASTER PURPOSE'



# '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



# WHAT WILL BE THE PURPOSES OF THE SECTOR IN FUTURE? THIS IS AN EXISTENTIAL CRISIS

- 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?

