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Intrinsic higher education and the threat of the employability mantra

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[TITLE SLIDE: Intrinsic higher education and the threat]

The topic of this webinar, the increasing tension between the educational activity of higher education and the demands of economic policy for job ready graduates and productivity-based measures of value, is difficult to resolve. It goes to the fundamental questions of what *is* higher education, what graduates gain from it, and what it should be doing.

[Where did we all go wrong? *Or did we?*]

There are signs that economic policy makers in the Anglophone countries, the high priests of neoliberalism, are losing patience with the higher education systems that now educate 50 per cent of the school leaver age group in the majority of countries – and especially losing patience with universities, which have a standing in the world independent of governments and are not easily brought to heel. In the UK the Teaching Excellence Framework judges the value of the intrinsic education function, which is essentially a process of cultural formation in knowledge, by the level of graduate salaries in the marketplace. Not the higher education marketplace, the general economy. So called ‘low value courses’, not just arts and philosophy but socially essential areas like nursing and teaching, are now vulnerable to enrolment reductions. In Australia the government wants ‘job ready graduates’, now, and would just love to see short-term micro credentials partly displace degree length learning.

The sign of the times though, the litmus test, is the new rhetoric from OECD. Andreas Schleicher says universities as beneficiaries of monopoly rents because they combine multiple functions. Presumably law and order and government would also work better if they were debundled into separated and competing sub-industries, providing new markets for business services firms to exploit. He says that shifting from higher education to micro credentials would ensure that provider status no longer matters in education, and students would be rewarded by employers for what they really know. Debundled micro-learning is the new social equity. Not sure how he got there. Dirk Van Damme sees graduate underemployment and overqualification. He too wants shorter courses and less higher education. So the middle class will have a full university education, while the masses are offered micro-learning and the quickest possible passage into the labour market. Where somehow, because they escaped higher education, the opportunities will just flow.

[Is employability *all* that higher education does? Can it be divided into pieces and distributed a bit at a time?]

But is employability *all* that higher education does? And can what higher education does be divided into pieces and distributed a bit at a time? Higher education provides much more than isolatable, measurable skills for individuals, which in any case are more efficiently provided in the workplace itself. It provides a much larger personal, cultural and social formation. It also creates a vast range of outcomes for society, for collectives and not just single graduates, of an economic, social, cultural and political kind. The micro-credential format does not lend itself to creating social tolerance at scale, or revitalising the economy of a region, or building the modern machinery of state in a newly emerging country.

[No one single value proposition can capture the complexity of what higher education does for people and society]

The point here is that the outcomes of higher education are multiple and complex. No one value proposition can capture all that it does. Providing a sewage system for the village, the university orchestra, research into malaria, first year computing, and training students to model the futures market, are qualitatively different. When the multiple outcomes of higher education are reduced to one ideological purpose, like national economic growth, or a single measure of value, like individual graduate salaries is the signifier of 'employability', this blocks everything else from view. This leads to government policies that lack effective purchase on the sector but nonetheless tend to conceal and reduce its potentials.

[Today's webinar]

This is what I will cover today. 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 are playing out in the social growth of participation, and in government-higher education relations focused on preparation for work. I conclude that the different functions are becoming increasingly incompatible.

[I. Intrinsic and extrinsic purposes of higher education]

The essential starting point for understanding the social functions of higher education is to accept that they are multiple. Higher education does many things. What conceptual tools do we have for unpacking this complexity? I want to suggest two schemas.

[The Inner core activity and the outer roles]

First, we can distinguish 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*, the education-knowledge core, can be wholly carried by agents within the institution. The extrinsic purposes necessarily involve external relations. Here agency is *shared* between agents within the institution and other agents outside the institution. Both are needed.

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 value of these intrinsic activities is measured not by policy, economic markets or social impact, but by internal agents using educational 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. 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 industry innovation, regional development, international relations, and so on.

Note that while the inner intrinsic purposes can be achieved without the extrinsic players, 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*. Unless there is this intrinsic education-knowledge core, we are no longer talking about higher education, we are talking about something else.

[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. These different types of higher education had various extrinsic social functions, but they had essentially the *same intrinsic functions*.

China's academies of higher learning were established by the Imperial state to prepare 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 into a vast range of knowledge, drawing scholars from all over Asia. The leading ancient Greek centre was the Library and Mouseion at Alexandria, 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, 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 repertoire from theology to the many fields of knowledge we know today.

[But every form of higher education has had two core intrinsic purposes, continuing to the present: they are essentially cultural]

Higher education was sometimes of state-driven, sometimes church-driven, and often partly or temporarily independent. But there was always these two 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 their immersion in knowledge. This is essentially a *cultural process*. It is not an economic process. It rests on language, abstraction, imagination and emotion.

[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 from the whole intrinsic and extrinsic, 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 training for a particular job or profession, or in a particular skill, to political literacy, and acquiring socially useful cultural knowledge. 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]

Now 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 free graduate autonomy only up to a point – they prefer *other-regulated* personal autonomy, regulated by them, not free self-regulated autonomy.

[The two purposes and three functions (2)]

In the public and policy discussions of purposes and value in higher education, 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 overshadows 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 and self-cultivation to Kant and the *Bildung* idea in Germany, JH Newman, John Dewey and the American pragmatists.

[When *cultural* processes are remade as solely *economic* training, subjectification and socialisation are 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 that this function exists.

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 through *knowledge* – work in which the roles of government and employers are relatively weak - are little acknowledged.

[III. Intrinsic function: subjectification]

Let's look more closely at the development of students as autonomous persons.

[Subjectification as self-formation offers more to students]

Arguably, 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 understand subjectification as *student self-formation*. Here higher education is understood not primarily 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 driver but 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. Then higher education is fundamentally empowering. I'm sure many in this webinar have been touched in this 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, for students not stymied by paid work, immersion in social experience.

[IV. extrinsic function 1: social status]

So that's the most important intrinsic purpose, self-formation through knowledge. Now I will discuss two extrinsic purposes in the sphere of qualification: higher education's roles in generating and differentiating social status, and preparation for work and occupations.

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

Why and 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 were operating long before Gary Becker. Because it generates economically valuable knowledge? Nineteenth century Johns Hopkins, when 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. 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 expandable opportunity structure in which status can be accessed, and one more legitimate than blood and kinship, race, gender, religion, geographical origin, residence, and wealth. These other distinctions still matter but have become modulated within educational distinctions: between the educated and uneducated, and between the different levels of education, fields of study, particular institutions within hierarchies, and languages and countries of study.

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

The orthodox explanation for the growth of higher education is that expanding economic demand for skills drives 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 expansion of skilled work and the growth of educational participation. Educational growth has been inexorable, happening in economy once national wealth reaches a minimum threshold. Governments never reduce the participation rate, they only preside over its growth. I think they respond to pressure from below, popular demand for opportunities for 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). People feel 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. 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 associated with *diminished* status. This drives ever continuing 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 – it differentiates knowledge and qualifications, it rank orders persons and institutions, using educational distinction to order society. 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 universities 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. Certain knowledge in certain institutions has high status making power. High status universities confer larger status on graduates and are a magnet for families that seek self-betterment.

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

Most basically higher education is: Education + knowledge + social status. it is strange, isn't it, that the three elements in the equation are partly hidden. Formative education and knowledge are rarely discussed as such in policy-making circles (except to the extent that scientific 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!

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

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

The allocation of social status via cultural formation in knowledge, which renders status allocation as the outcome of individual effort and merit, looks more legitimate than the open determination of status by wealth, or on the basis of university attended. Yet cultural formation via knowledge allows both of these less attractive methods to operate under the radar. Hence the status differentiation function renders even massified systems as elitist, while enhancing frustrations when graduates cannot readily access 'graduate jobs'.

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, excluded from social esteem, parity of agency and full effective citizenship. And from the fact of stratification, combined with the fact of 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 social outcomes will worsen – but it points to limits in what higher education alone can achieve.

[V. Extrinsic purpose 2: vocational preparation]

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.

[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. More efficient training in skills and employability occurs in the job. Accepting the heterogeneity of education and work 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. 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.

[The intrinsic and extrinsic functions are out of synch]

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.

[VI. Cultural formation or 'job ready graduates'?]

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.

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

The UK measures the value of *teaching and learning* in terms of graduate earnings. This means ignoring all the other factors that shape earnings, and ignoring the rationales for learning programmes in self-formation, socialisation and the public good. Australia wants 'job ready graduates' and better to have them with micro credentials. 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 heterogeneous knowledges focused on the formation of autonomous persons.

['Employability' is ostensibly 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* even 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.

[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 it 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.

[An existential crisis FOR higher education]

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.

I think this is an existential crisis for the sector. 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?