The educational purposes of higher education: changing discussions of the societal outcomes of educating students

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Abstract

In this article, I examine the educational purposes of higher education in terms of the societal outcomes of educating students through higher education. Based on an analysis of the first 80 volume of *Higher Education*, published from 1972 to 2020, I argue that discussions of societal educational purposes were dominated by authors from the Anglophone, global North and these authors were more likely to write as if the educational purposes under discussion were relevant to all higher education systems regardless of national context. This tendency increased over time. The overall models of the educational purposes in each contribution differed in terms of whether they focused on single, multiple, or differentiated sets of educational purposes. I argue that as higher education has become increasingly stratified, there has been less discussion of whether there are differences in the societal outcomes served by different forms of higher education. This is problematic because it obscures the potential differences in the educational purposes of higher education in different societies and the extent to which inequalities are perpetuated by differences in the forms of higher education to which students gain access. In order to address this, I argue there is a need to move away from a focus on the educational purposes of the institutional form of 'the University' to focus on the educational purposes that are served by different configurations of higher education systems.

Keywords Educational purposes · Higher education systems · Inequalities · Stratification · The University

Introduction

Commonly, discussions of the purposes of higher education are focused on the overall purposes of higher education and these are treated as synonymous with the purposes of 'the University' as an institutional form. This is true for both the seminal statements on the purposes of higher education (for example, Newman 1976; Nyerere, 1971; Kerr, 1963; Nussbaum, 2010) and discussions of the purposes of higher education within the field of higher education studies (for examples, see Perlmutter, 1958; Fawley, 1971; Kerr, 1990; Deem,

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2008; Zgaga, 2009; Biesta, 2011; McArthur, 2011). Rather than discussing the purposes of higher education more generally, this article is focused on the *educational* purposes of higher education.

In focusing on the educational purposes of higher education, this article examines what the education that is offered to students through higher education is intended to achieve for societies. The focus is on the outcomes that these educational processes are expected to contribute to societies rather than on the educational process and how students are changed by this (as discussed, for example, by Ashwin, 2020). Whilst these societal outcomes will affect the form of education, this relationship is complex because a number of different purposes can be served by the same form of education and the same purpose can be served by different educational forms.

There are two reasons for focusing more specifically on the educational purposes of higher education rather than the more typical discussions of 'the idea of the University' (for example, see MacIntyre, 2009). First, as higher education has expanded globally, it has become increasingly true that not all institutions of higher education are universities and that not all universities offer higher education (Barnett, 2004). Second, in line with Kerr's (1963) idea of the 'multiversity', individual institutions involve the bringing together of a great many purposes that are informed by a range of contradictory normative principles. They conduct primary research, offer education to a diverse range of students, and work with governments, businesses, professions, and local communities. It should be noted that the separation of the educational purposes from the wider purposes of higher education in this article is an analytical commitment rather than a practical commitment to 'unbundling' of the institutional form of the university (Robertson and Komljenovic, 2016; McCowan, 2017).

Whilst previous research has focused more on the purposes of the university than the educational purposes of higher education, the models generated still offer an insight into these educational purposes. In relation to European and American approaches to higher education, Zgaga (2009) and Sam and Van Der Sijde (2014) each identify four models. Three of these are common: the Humboldtian model that is focused on the advancement of knowledge, the vocationally oriented Napoleonic model, and the personality-oriented Anglo-Saxon model. The fourth model for Zgaga (2009) is focused on the development of critical citizens, whereas for Sam and Van Der Sijde (2014), the fourth model is a US hybrid that combines the elements of the other three models. In addition to these models, there has also been discussions of the African model of the University (for example, Nyerere, 1971) which emphasises the role that education must play in solving urgent societal problems and a Chinese model of the educational purposes of higher education that focuses on creating harmony between people and the world (Yang, 2022).

Examining whether and how the discussion of the societal educational purposes of higher education in the journal has changed is important given the changes to higher education over the fifty years that *Higher Education* has been published. One of the clearest changes has been the increases in access to higher education globally and with these increases in the size and complexity of national systems of higher education (Cantwell et al., 2018; Grubb et al., 2005). In 1972 when the first issue of the journal was published, the Gross Tertiary Enrollment was 26% in high-income countries, 6% in middle-income countries, and 2% in low-income countries. In 2015, the figures were 74% for high-income countries, 33% for middle-income countries, and 8% for low-income countries with the number of students worldwide increasing from 36 to 218 million (World Bank Ed Stats). This growth in higher education is over three times higher than population growth and over one half times higher than growth in GDP over the same period (Clancy & Marginson,

2018). It has also been associated with a greater diversity of students and higher educa-
tion institutions, although the extent of these forms of diversity varies between systems of
higher education (Antonowicz et al., 2018).

Another key change has been a shift to focus on higher education systems rather than
higher education institutions (Marginson, 2018; Noonan, 2018; Williams, 2018). As higher
education provision systems have expanded, there has been increased vertical stratification
between institutions (Cantwell et al., 2018; Trow, 1973). Whilst the expansion of higher
education systems offered new educational opportunities for a wider range of students, the
increase in vertical stratification also contributed to the perpetuation and reinforcement of
social and economic inequalities due to differences in the status of different types of insti-
tution and in who gains access to these institutions (Wheelahan et al., 2012; Wheelahan,
2016; Marginson, 2018; Bathmaker and Orr 2020). The tensions within different higher
education systems and their potential to perpetuate inequalities raise important questions
about whether students with different demographic characteristics are offered forms of
higher education that are designed to meet different educational purposes.

In this article, I review how the societal outcomes from educating students through
higher education have been written about over the first 50 years of *Higher Education*. I
examine the locations of the authors who had their writing about these educational pur-
poses published in the journal, the variety of societal educational purposes identified,
and how these were to be realised. I then examine how these different elements combine
into overall models of the societal outcomes of higher education and the way these have
changed over the five decades of the journal. Based on this analysis, I argue that there is a
need to analyse the educational purposes expressed across higher education systems rather
than the purposes of 'the University' as an institution. This would support a conversation
about the relations between the education offered by particular higher education systems
and the societies in which they operate. This would allow an exploration of the extent to
which the educational purposes of higher education vary between societies rather than
assuming these purposes are always the same.

Method

This article is based on an analysis on the first 80 volumes of *Higher Education* that
were published from 1973 to 2020. In these 80 volumes, there were 393 separate issues
(although five of these were joint issues containing more than one numbered issue).

Selection of articles for analysis

From the 80 volumes of *Higher Education*, I initially selected only articles and reports of
research for the initial review because I was focused on how the purposes of higher educa-
tion were positioned in contributions that were intended to make an original contribution
to the field of higher education studies. This decision meant that announcements, book
reviews, correspondence, editorials, forewords, and introductions to issues were excluded
from the initial sorting of contributions to the journal. The abstracts of 2913 contributions
to the journal were initially read to identify whether they were focused on an educational
aspect of higher education or another aspect (for example, research) of higher education.
As shown in Table 1, this process identified 1488 (51%) contributions that were focused on
education. The full text of these contributions was read in order to examine whether they

Table 1 Total contributions to journal, contributions focused on education, and contributions focused on educational purposes of higher education by decade of publication

Time period	Total contributions	Number of contributions on education (%)	Number of contributions on educational purposes of higher education (% of those on education)
1972–1979	257	156 (61%)	27 (17%)
1980–1989	405	218 (54%)	18 (8%)
1990–1999	510	263 (52%)	15 (6%)
2000–2009	598	288 (48%)	21 (7%)
2010–2020	1143	563 (49%)	24 (4%)

explicitly discussed the educational purposes of higher education, with 105 contributions found to do this (7% of those contributions focused on an educational aspect of higher education). Table 1 sets out a summary of this for each 10 years of the journal.

In selecting the contributions, the initial decision on whether a contribution focused on education was based on whether it directly concerned the education of students by higher education. This meant that topics that were related to education but not directly related to the education of students were excluded, such as contributions on student politics and activism and contributions on the academic profession. Similarly, contributions that focused on the development of higher education systems but did not explicitly consider their educational role were also excluded.

In deciding whether a contribution explicitly discussed the educational purposes of higher education, the focus was on whether the contribution explicitly discussed the outcomes for societies that were expected from the educational process offered by higher education. It should not be assumed that the purposes identified were advocated by the authors. In the contributions analysed, around two-thirds (69) involved an argument for particular educational purposes, whereas one-third (36) involved the description of educational purposes, for example, the educational purposes set out in a particular government policy document. This meant that the contributions were primarily normative in the way that they approach the educational purposes of higher education and there were no articles that empirically investigated the educational purposes of higher education. In identifying these expected outcomes for the educational process, it is also important to be clear that there was no assumption that the outcomes discussed were the only educational outcomes that authors attributed to higher education. Rather the intention was to identify as many different educational purposes that were identified across the contributions and to examine how these shifted over time.

Approach to analysis

In analysing the contributions, I examined the following:

- The dates and volume of each contribution.
- The geographical location of the institution(s) of the author(s). These were initially done by the country and then aggregated to geographical region and the global North and South. Whilst the application of these terms is contentious, imprecise and potentially anachronistic given the timeframe of the analysis, it was considered important in

order to map whether globally privileged views of the educational purposes of higher education were dominant in the same way that the global North has dominated in academic publishing more generally (Collyer, 2018).

- All of the societal educational purposes that were identified within each contribution.
- The way in which these educational purposes were achieved.
- Whether the educational purposes identified seemed to refer to all higher education or whether educational purposes were differentiated across different forms of higher education.
- The relationship between higher education and society that was implied in the discussions of the educational purposes of higher education.
- Whether the contribution was an argument for particular educational purposes or a description of how another actor (for example, a government) positioned the educational purposes of higher education.
- Whether the purposes appeared to be related to the whole of global higher education or a particular higher education system. If the latter, whether this system was the one in which the author was located or a different higher education system.

The different elements of the analysis were brought together to develop overall models of the societal educational purposes of higher education expressed in each contribution. Whereas the analysis of all of the societal educational purposes involved simply identifying which purposes were expressed in each contribution, the generation of the overall models involved considering the relations between these different purposes and how they were to be achieved. In some models, particular purposes were seen as incidental or supporting of a single overall societal educational purpose; in other models, multiple purposes were seen as important; and in a final model, the societal educational purposes were differentiated between different kinds of students.

The findings from the review were analysed using descriptive statistics to show the frequencies of the different elements examined in the study. Bivariate analysis was carried out using cross-tabulations to examine the relationships and patterns between these different elements.

Outcomes

The institutional location of authors published on the educational purposes of higher education

Table 2 shows the countries in which the institution of the first author was located, using the country designations that were in use at the time of the publication of each contribution. It shows that the most contributions came from the USA (17) and from England (14) and over half the contributions came from first authors located in Anglophone countries. This is unsurprising given that *Higher Education* is an English Language journal but it highlights the partial view it gives of higher education internationally.

Table 3 combines these into geographical regions and indicates that contributions from Europe were the most common (56) followed by North America (19) and Asia (15). Apart from the domination of the European and Anglo-American models of higher education, the most striking outcome was the lack of contributions from South America.

Table 2 The number of contributions from countries based on the institutional location of first authors

Country location of the institution of the first author	Number
USA	17
England	14
Finland, South Africa	6
Australia, the Netherlands	5
Hong Kong, Scotland, Sweden	4
China, Israel, Poland	3
Canada, Germany, India, Iraq, Kenya, Russia, Spain, Taiwan	2
Austria, Bahrain, Belgium, Chile, Denmark, Japan, Lesotho, Malaysia, New Zealand, Portugal, Saudi Arabia, Singapore, Tanzania, Thailand, Uganda	1

Table 3 The number of contributions from geographical regions based on the institutional location of first authors

Geographical region	Number
Europe	46
North America	19
Asia	15
Sub-Saharan Africa	11
Middle East, North Africa, Greater Arabia	7
Australia and Oceania	6
South America	1

Aggregating the countries into those considered to be in the global North and South, 73% of the contributions that discussed the educational purposes of higher education were from authors located in institutions in the global North and 23% from authors in the global South. The remaining 4% were co-authored by teams of researchers from both the global North and global South. This suggests that the discussion of the societal educational purposes of higher education was largely from researchers located in the global North. Whilst this is not surprising given the overall contributors to the journal, what is more significant is how these authors presented their discussions of the purposes of higher education. Two-thirds of the contributions focused on the societal educational purposes of specific higher education systems. Of the third of contributions that appeared to focus on discussing the educational purposes of all higher education, 85% were located in the global North.

The question this raises is the extent to which these authors extrapolated from their own system of higher education to all of global higher education. Interestingly, this tendency to write as if referring to all systems of higher education appears to have increased over time with around one-fifth of the contributions taking this perspective in the 1970s and the 1980s and around a half from the 1990s onwards. This change fits with the rise of the discourse around the global university in the 1990s which preceded, and arguably made possible, the development of global university rankings in 2003–2004 (Marginson & Rhoades, 2002; Marginson in press). However, it also raises questions about whether there has been an associated loss of a sense of the particularities of the societal educational purposes of higher education within particular countries.

The societal educational purposes of higher education identified

In analysing the societal educational purposes of higher education identified in the contributions, it is important to be clear that higher education institutions have always served a range of purposes and the view of these purposes varies according to whether it is from a policy, student, or academic perspective (Swartz et al., 2019). However, in their analysis of the founding charters of universities from the thirteenth to the twenty-first century, Kivinen and Poikus (2006), whilst accepting there has been a shift in who can access higher education, argued that the range of purpose have remained relatively similar:

> The local and national interest, strengthening the proper faith, and training public servants have remained the reasons for founding universities from the 13th century until now. Higher education has throughout history been regarded as the solution to the most diverse problems. Quenching the thirst for knowledge and promoting wisdom, truth, and justice have always been familiar reasons for academic establishments. It has been known from the beginning that studies pave the way to happiness for all mankind, both economic and spiritual. Even achieving peace has been regarded as one of the reasons for higher education. (Kivinen & Poikus, 2006, p. 205)

Table 4 sets out all of the societal educational purposes identified across all of the contributions analysed and they were consistent with those identified by Kivinen and Poikus (2016).

The most frequent educational purpose identified was that the role of higher education was to produce a skilled workforce for society. For many authors, this role was seen as self-evident:

> It may be a cliche´ to begin an article by arguing that a primary task of HE institutions is to prepare students to manage flexible jobs in changing markets. But the importance of this task cannot be ignored. (Nygaard et al., 2008, p.33)

It is also seen as crucial in order to maintain the legitimacy of higher education.

> In a context of limited resources for education and visible skill deficiencies, the credibility and legitimacy of the university depends upon its ability to gear its training in some measure to the provision of skills sought by the national community. All three

Table 4 Number (and percentages) of contributions expressing each societal educational purpose of higher education

Educational purposes	Number (% of articles including this purpose)
Production of skilled workforce	77 (73%)
Development of critically reflective individuals	52 (50%)
Development of a critically reflective society	43 (41%)
Development of a peaceful society	12 (11%)
Development of a more equal society	10 (10%)
Development of individuals	7 (7%)
Development of a mobile society	4 (4%)
Development of religious values in society	2 (2%)

East African universities have attempted to move towards more vocationally specific curricula and tighter manpower planning. (Court, 1977, p.49)

The production of a skilled workforce was the most common educational purpose identified in contributions from the global North and South. However, there was some indication that the production of a skilled workforce was more common in contributions from the global South where 79% of contributions included this purpose compared to 68% of contributions from the global North. Closely related to the development of a skilled workforce was the less common focus on developing a society that was mobile.

The second most frequent educational purpose of higher education was the development of critically reflective individuals; half of the contributions highlighted this purpose. This was referred to by different terms including 'knowledge capability' (Bailee et al. 2013) and 'reflective thinking' (Steur et al., 2012) but the purpose was focused on the production of individuals who had a moral commitment to questioning knowledge and understanding different world views. Some traced this purpose back to Aristotle (Himanka, 2015) and the concept of Bildung was also sometimes drawn upon:

A posthuman Bildung is a lifelong task of realising one's responsibility within an ecology of world relations, it occurs outside as well as inside formal education, in virtual as well as 'real' places. Furthermore, a posthuman Bildung interrogates what 'citizenship' as a political project might mean, it deepens and extends ethical accountably by reformulating who and what social justice is 'for' and includes, and complicates all such projects by positing that all our educative encounters are material, co-emergent and experimental becomings which cannot be planned or known in advance. (Taylor, 2017, p.432)

This educational purpose was more common in contributions from the global North with 53% highlighting this purpose compared to 39% of contributions from the global South. It is important to distinguish this educational purpose from the less common purpose that focused on the development of individuals. In this case, there was not a sense that the individual developed had a critical moral purpose but rather about meeting the individual's need for self-development:

While higher education is a profitable investment for both individual and society as a whole, this paper concludes that any future expansion needs to carefully identify the appropriate demands of the individual, and ensure these match societal needs. This is particularly so at a time when Taiwan's economy is moving towards parity with developed countries, and where a workforce of highly qualified employees will be necessary to intensify its competitiveness in the international trade market. (Wang, 2003, p.283)

Closely related to the purpose of developing critically reflective individuals was the educational purpose of developing a critical society which was highlighted in 41% of the submissions. This purpose went beyond the production of an individual to actively identify the contribution that this individual would make to society. Sometimes this educational purpose was seen to be in tension with the production of a skilled workforce, whereas in others, they were seen as complimentary:

The vocational purposes of higher education are incidental and secondary, and could often be provided for in other ways. The principal reason why we have universities and colleges is concerned with the extension of civilisation, with the rediscovery of man's highest creative achievements, with the need in every generation to ques-

tion and challenge what has been created, and with the excitement of new discovery. The benefit is, or should be, the enlargement of culture and the enlivening of minds. (Carter, 1973, p.212)

[O]ur human capacity to feel is one facet that distinguishes us from robots and computers. And it is this one human facet – if channeled properly in the educational process – that might just save our planet and us from the destruction of the environment and the destruction and degradation caused by war. Moreover, it would produce the kind of people that industry now requires. (Doyon, 2001, p.468)

The remaining educational purposes of higher education related to the development of a cohesive society, although this appeared in different forms including ensuring social harmony, creating more equal society, and developing religious values in society. In some cases, it was about ensuring social harmony and preventing unrest:

The overriding goal of the universities is to assist in the promotion of national integration and unity. It is hoped that this will be achieved through their teaching as well as non-curricular programs, and through the use of the national language - Malay -- as the principal medium of instruction. In this manner the gradual moulding of moral discipline and the inculcation of national values will lead towards this fundamental aim. (Ahmat, 1980, p.724)

This educational purpose was more common in contributions from the global South with 29% of contributions highlighting this purpose compared to 5% of contributions from the global North. Similarly, the development of more equal society was more common in contributions from the global South than the global North (18% compared to 6%) The relative scarcity of discussion of the development of a more equal society suggests that this tends to be decoupled from discussions of the educational purposes of higher education.

Today's purpose is to bring within the reach of every member of the African society that touch of the romantic hitherto reserved for men of noble birth or gentle upbringing. This intrusion upon the privileges of the few need not spread desperation. Good university education should be capable of well planned and executed expansion. Above all, the more a nation's population exhibit and accept the values of the "educated", the more "civilized" the nation should become. The popularization of civilized values must surely be the goal of every civilization and the modern university can hardly afford to be left out of such a venture in Africa. (Wandira, 1981, pp.269-270)

A final educational purpose was the development of religious values in society:

The philosophy of the educational system has essentially been based on co-relating religious morals and cultural traditions with modern economics, and both technological and scientific development. (Madany et al., 1988 p. 413)

The realisation of the societal educational purposes of higher education

In all cases, the societal educational purposes of higher education were positioned as being realised through the development of students, although this development took different forms and the role of selection and the signals sent by the qualifications students' achieved were also recognised (for example, Jones, 1979; Smolentseva, 2017a). There were two areas in which the realisation of educational purposes of higher education varied across the

contributions. These were whether the same educational purposes applied to all students in higher education and the relationship to the world beyond higher education established within these educational purposes.

In over 90% of contributions, the educational purposes of higher education were written about as if they applied to all students whether in a single system or across global higher education. However, there was a small subset of contributions in the 1970s and 1980s in which it was argued that the education offered should be differentiated in terms of higher education that offered intellectual training and higher education that offered preparation of employment:

> In short, for the production of high level manpower, there is at least some ground for querying whether the university is an appropriate institution either in its professional programmes or still more in its less job specific courses. Conversely, there is a case for exploring more full-heartedly what alternative institutions and processes could be created to form manpower for the so called high level functions, less expensively, more effectively and less injuriously to society at large. The foregoing discussion has concentrated exclusively on the university as a designated producer of manpower, which is to say on its function to teach those who intend not to be professional academics themselves, but to make their livelihood elsewhere. (Oxenam 1980, p.654)

The second area of difference was the relationship between the education offered by higher education and the society in which the education took place. In 80% of cases, there was no discussion of the relationship to society and it appeared to be assumed that the two were separate. In six contributions, this separation was made explicit:

> Education could, instead, be allowed to develop on the basis of its own premises, for instance, devocationalizing schools and shifting the acquisition of vocational skills to the workplace. The obstacles to loosening the bond between education and work are manifold but they are more a question of politics and vested interests than of identifying or meeting 'genuine' educational needs. (Kivinen & Ahola, 1999, p.205)

In six contributions, there was an argument for the education offered to more integrated with society:

> Colleges may boast numerous talents and opportunities within their own walls, but life itself certainly offers a pool much larger than any which a single social institution can provide. Communities must become an integral part of their educational scheme, and colleges must retain and develop their individual characters to take full advantage of the settings, tradition, facilities, and resources uniquely available to each one of them. (Yamamoto, 1975, p.216)

Overall models of the societal educational purposes of higher education

Table 5 sets out the overall models of the societal educational purposes of higher education by the decade in which the contributions were published. Whereas Table 4 treats each educational purpose separately, Table 5 examines how these different purposes were brought together in each contribution to the journal and takes account of how these societal educational purposes were to be realised. There were seven overall models of the societal educational purposes of higher education that fall into three main categories of single purpose models, multiple purpose models, and a differentiated purposes model.

Table 5 Overall models of the societal educational purposes of higher education expressed by contributions and the decades in which the contributions were published

Educational purposes	Number	1972–1979	1980–1989	1990–1999	2000–2009	2010–2020
Single purposes						
Critical agency changing society	36	8	7	6	5	10
Employment	30	6	4	5	8	7
Self-development	10	2	0	2	4	2
Cohesive society	3	1	0	0	0	2
Multiple purposes						
Employment and cohesion	15	0	6	2	4	3
Employment and critical society	2	2	0	0	0	0
Differentiated purposes						
Critical agency for some, employment for others	9	8	1	0	0	0
	105	27	18	15	21	24

There were four different models within the single societal educational purpose category. Whilst these models sometimes combined different elements, these elements were integrated into a single educational purpose. The most common model, Critical Agency Changing Society, was one in which higher education led to the development of critical agency in students and thereby led to changes in society. This model was present across all of the decades of the journal and the changes in society could be in terms of a more critical and/or equal society and sometimes included the production of a skilled workforce:

> Universities can disrupt hierarchies, opening out significant opportunities and achievements for marginalized or under-represented groups and individuals, and can instill altruistic values and outcomes as a contribution to more justice in society. While higher education has a reproductive role in reproducing existing social hierarchies of social class, gender, race and language, it also has this potentially transformative role. Moreover, research on social change suggests that if (professional) elites are sufficiently socially aware, they can play a significant role in transformative development, not only through quality public services, but also by broadening civic participation and consolidating democratic reforms. (Walker 2016, p.419)

The second model within the single educational purpose category was that the educational purpose of higher education was related to employment. This was again present in all of the decades of the journal and was often expressed in terms of developing graduates with the attributes to succeed in the labour market to the benefit of both students and society:

> Academics have consistently maintained that a university education should go beyond acquiring a knowledge of a discipline or becoming competent to practice a profession… Economic forces have also strengthened the calls for generic capabilities. Developed economies are being forced to move out of basic manufacturing

as they cannot compete with cheaper labour in less-developed countries. To make the transition to knowledge-based economies requires an intelligent labour force with additional capabilities such as creative thinking, flexibility, adaptability and information technology skills. (Kember, 2009, pp.37-38)

The third model within the single purpose category focused on the individual development of the student. This was present in all of the decades apart from the 1980s. In some cases, this focused on the development of critically reflective individuals but it was made explicit that this was an end in itself:

The autopoietic identity of the university, as I hope to have shown in this paper, justifies academic professors being preoccupied with what their students know, understand, are able to question and explain, and not with what concepts and qualities are currently considered worthy a transaction within the system of the economy—be it even a transaction of employment at the job market. The ruts of academic work have been set long ago to travel from unknown to known, and from disciple to master. (Lenartowicz, 2015, p.959)

In other cases, the focus was not on developing critically reflective individuals but in meeting the demands of students for whatever form of self-development they identified as most important.

In today's society, where knowledge is central to social and economic progress, and individuals are increasingly focussing on the self, the demand for new learning and renewal of competence can be characterised as unpredictable and heterogeneous. In this article, we have argued that the business concept that is most appropriate in this constellation should be one that enables and encourages a customer-oriented, tailor-made education, where learner needs are the driver of the system. (Jongbloed 2002, p.428)

The final model within the single educational purpose category focused on the educational role of higher education as being related to the development of a cohesive society. Cases of this model where it was not related to other purposes were only identified in three contributions and it was sometimes set in contrast to the Western model of the university:

In the Chinese tradition, higher learning has always unapologetically emphasised practical learning and a connected approach, as it views serving society and the nation as a primary goal. In the ancient Chinese mind, it is never enough to advance the learning of the individual. One must achieve self-cultivation through the learning of ethics and subsequently use that self-cultivation to serve the state. Education has always been oriented towards the affairs of the state—'sustaining cultural and ancestral heritages, governing the nation, and harmonizing the people instead of a narrow individual purpose' (Xu 2016). (Lu & Jover, 2019, p.431)

The multiple societal educational purposes category included two models that focused on achieving two educational purposes. One of these, which first appeared in the journal in the 1980s, focused on both employment and societal cohesion:

By the early 1970s therefore it had become apparent that there needed to be a new approach to higher education if the pressures and frustrations from below were not to lead to violence. Such a situation was also obviously unsatisfactory for an economy that was growing very fast (during the 1960s GNP growth was between 6% and 8%) especially since there was growing concern in Thailand to plan social and economic

development and to link both secondary and tertiary education with manpower requirements in various parts of the economy. (Watson, 1981, p.303)

The second multiple purposes' model focused on the development of critical society and a skilled workforce. It was only found in two discussions of Polish higher education in the 1970s (Kietlinska, 1972; Kluczyński et al., 1972) although it was also one of the models of purposes discussed in an exploration of policy documents from the USSR (Smolentseva, 2017b). Whilst there was a sense that this model involved the development of individuals, the educational purpose of this development was not for the individuals but for the society in which they were operating:

> Clearly, education was considered an instrument of political, social and economic development. However the dominance of the socializing function of education should be acknowledged: the major goal was a formation of "a harmoniously developed personality", as well as certain ideological attitudes. Emphasizing supra-individual interests, the documents have not overlooked individual needs and agency, leaving to the individuals the right to choose the profession following their vocation and abilities. (Smolentseva, 2017b, pp.1095-6)

The third category was focused on differentiated educational purposes and included a single model. In this model, different outcomes were identified for different forms of higher education or for different students. For some, higher education was about developing critical agency, whereas for others higher education was about employment. This model was present in the 1970s and, to a much lesser extent in the 1980s, but was not present after this. This version of differentiated higher education was most fully developed by Clark Kerr (1978):

> One of these (Model X) would center around what Parsons and Platt (1973) have called the "core sector" of graduate training and research, but I would add related pre-graduate training as in the selective liberal arts colleges in the United States. The second (Model Y) would be organized, formally or informally, around the occupational and vocational needs of society for undergraduate training and around the "general education" interests of students. The third (Model Z) would be responsive to social demand based on any reason, subject only to consumer choice. There are, of course, points of overlap. …The central theme of the first is scholarship; of the second, attention formally or informally to the labor market and the preparation of what economists call "human capital"; of the third, the satisfaction of individual desires for self-development. (Kerr, 1978, p.270-271)

Discussion

The analysis in this article has highlighted that higher education was positioned as focusing on a number of societal educational purposes. However, these individual societal educational purposes were often combined and integrated into an overall model with a single societal educational purpose. The result of this was that, whilst the development of a skilled workforce was the most frequent individual purpose, as an overall model the development of critical agency to change society was the most frequent. This tension between the higher education for employment and higher education for critical

agency seems to parallel the tension between the reproductive and transformative power of higher education in society.

In relation to the overall models of the societal educational purposes of higher education, in most cases, they appeared to align with the models explored in the previous literature. The 'employment' and 'self-development' appeared to align with the vocationally-orientated models and personality-orientated models identified by Zgaga (2009) and Sam and Van Der Sijde (2014). Elements of the 'critical agency changing society' model appeared to align with the both Zgaga's (2009) model focused on the development of critical citizens, Sam and Van Der Sijde (2014)'s US hybrid model, and Nyere's (1971) emphasis that education most solve urgent social problems. The social cohesion model appeared to align with the focus on education creating harmony between people and the world (Yang, 2022). The word 'alignment' is deliberately chosen to indicate a broad similarity between the models rather than an exact match. The exception was that the knowledge advancement model identified by Zgaga (2009) and Sam and Van Der Sijde (2014) did not appear to be present. It is possible that knowledge advancement was part of the 'critical agency changing society' model, with knowledge as the basis of the change in students and society rather than the societal outcome that is sought (for example see Ashwin, 2020). However, it is notable that the advancement of knowledge did not appear to be a discrete outcome for society of educating students through higher education.

There were three additional models not highlighted in the previous literature. The 'employment and cohesion' and the 'employment and critical society' models involved distinctive combinations of the elements of the other models and appeared to reflect the ways in which societal priorities shape the educational purposes of higher education within particular systems of higher education. This lies in tension with the increasing tendency in the contributions to write as if discussions of the educational purposes of higher education are relevant to all systems of higher education. This tension suggests the need to avoid the assumption that there are general societal educational purposes of higher education that exist independently of the conditions in particular societies. This is not to suggest that there are necessarily differences in what higher education attempts to achieve in bringing students in relationship to knowledge (Ashwin, 2020) but rather that there may be important differences in what this process is for.

The third additional model was the 'differentiated purposes' model, which emphasised the different societal outcomes of higher education for different students. This model was clearly articulated in the 1970s but has disappeared from discussions of the educational purposes of higher education from the 1990s onwards. What is notable about this is that higher education has become increasingly vertically stratified since the 1970s (Cantwell et al., 2018). Thus as differences in the status of different types of institution and differences in who gains access to these institutions have increased (Wheelahan et al., 2012; Wheelahan, 2016; Marginson, 2018; Bathmaker and Orr 2020), the field of higher education studies as reflected in this journal appears to have engaged in less discussion about whether this vertical stratification results in different parts of higher education systems serving different educational purposes.

One explanation of the lack of discussion of the differentiated educational purposes of higher education is the focus on the purposes of the university as an institution (for example in MacIntyre, 2009; Sam et al., 2014; Zgaga, 2009) rather than focusing on higher education systems (Marginson, 2018; Noonan, 2018; Williams, 2018). In focusing on the purposes of a particular societal institution, it is difficult to discern the way in which these purposes are differentiated. Instead this institution of 'the University' becomes loaded with

many different and potentially contradictory purposes and becomes 'an imagined abstraction' (Marginson & Considine, 2000, p.40).

In shifting to focusing on the educational purposes of higher education systems, it is possible to consider mapping these systems and understanding how different kinds of higher education institution might serve different educational purposes. This is not to argue for the unbundling of these educational purposes from the institution of the university (Robertson and Komljenovic 2016; McCowan, 2017) but it is rather to argue that we need to open up discussions about what societal outcomes are served by the different forms of higher education that different students have access to. Without this focus, the danger is that whilst vertical stratification and inequalities in access to, and outcomes from, higher education increase, discussions of the educational purposes of higher education focus very partially on the purposes served by a very particular and privileged institutional form: the University. Indeed whilst it is easy to dismiss Kerr (1978) argument for differentiated higher education as a way of protecting elite higher education, the question raised is how a system can be developed that offers fair access for students and is cost-effective for societies. Whilst from today's perspective, Kerr's (1978) solution would appear to reinforce educational inequalities, there is a need to be clear sighted about the current stratification that exists across higher education systems (Cantwell et al., 2018) and to be committed to understanding and addressing its role in perpetuating inequalities.

A shift to focusing on the educational purposes of higher education systems rather than 'the University' offers the possibility of analysing how the configurations of higher education systems relate to the societal educational purposes served by those systems. This could open up discussions of the educational purposes of higher education to a broader range of educational systems than those currently present in contributions to *Higher Education*. It also might help to shift the discussion from how the 'African' or 'Chinese' University is different from the 'European' or 'Anglo-American' University to a more fine-grained analysis of how these systems operate in their own terms. As part of this, there is a need to have more explicit conversations about the relationships between the education offered by higher education systems and the societies in which they operate. As participation in higher education has increased, it has become increasingly untenable to consider higher education as separate from society and there is a need to more fully understand higher education systems as an integral part of the societies in which they operate. At a basic level, this involves being much more explicit about the legitimacy of the educational purposes of higher education varying between societies but it also involves exploring how the purposes and outcomes are shaped different 'national assemblages' of the family, the state, education, and the economy (Marginson, 2018).

Conclusion

This article has examined how the societal educational purposes of higher education were discussed over the first 80 volumes of *Higher Education.* Whilst discussions of the educational aspects of higher education have accounted for around half of the contributions to the journal, discussions of the societal educational purposes have been much less common and have tended to focus on the purposes of the university as in institution. I have argued that, in the future, there should be a shift from focusing on the educational idea of 'the University' to the educational purposes of higher education systems. This is in order to gain a greater understanding of whether the increasing vertical stratification of higher education

is leading to different educational purposes being served by different parts of those systems and thereby perpetuating educational inequalities.

Declarations

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