**The Purpose of Higher Education**

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The purpose of a university education in the UK, and indeed the purpose of universities themselves, has been the subject of significant debate and transformation over the past 20 years. The traditional idea of universities and the education they provide as a benefit to society and as a public good is increasingly at odds with more economically-focussed outcomes. With the introduction of student fees, and increased competition between universities both for funding and for students, the higher education sector has become increasingly marketised. In this review I will outline two main views on the purpose of a university education (understood here as an undergraduate bachelor's degree), that of education for social good and that of education for economic gain. I will then discuss the ways in which that purpose has been explicitly shifted in discourse from the former to the latter over the past 20 years, before considering what this means for higher education in the UK today.

**The Purpose of a University Education Debated**

The purpose of a higher education is bound up with that of universities themselves, and these purposes have long been considered by scholars within universities as well as by outside parties. Shapiro succinctly defines the university's role as: 'a place where learning, knowledge, skills, and traditions are preserved, re-evaluated, and transmitted.' (Shapiro, 2006: 10).This definition encompasses the role of the university in both creating as well as transmitting knowledge - translating to research and teaching - but also conveys the wider sense of the university as a place for thinking, and for experiencing this thought. Such debate and mediation of knowledge within universities is undertaken according to accepted methods of research and scholarly conduct and enquiry, developed and maintained within the academy, and to undertake a university education is to be exposed to, and inducted within, these methods and standards (Collini, 2011: 14). A university education therefore should be preparation for an individual to take part in meeting the challenges facing society, either from continuing debates within academia, expanding the boundaries of knowledge further, or outside of academia, where the experience of scholarly rigour and ability to question will be of benefit to wider society (Nixon, 2011: 26). Following early scholars such as Humboldt and Newman, the education obtained by students instils in them a 'cultural literacy', and participation in this university environment is a model for the wider community at large (Harris, 2012:5). The true value of a university education therefore does not lie in the mastery of facts surrounding, for example, the names of numerous archaeological cultures and chronologies, but more in the understanding of how this, and other, knowledge has been constructed through academic research, and how it should continue to be constructed, reconstructed and challenged in the future.

This is not to say that some professions do not require the acquisition of specific skills or knowledge as part of their higher education - medicine, engineering and architecture are obvious cases in point. Yet the teaching of these subjects are situated in universities, rather than training colleges, because universities function as "gatekeepers" for several professions, maintaining standards within the professions as well as autonomy from governments (Hussey and Smith, 2011: 78). Degree courses in these subjects may act as qualifications within these fields, but also, as with degrees in other areas, serve to induct members into the ways in which these fields of knowledge and practice are constructed, maintained and grow.

By and large, the purpose of universities and the education they provide to individuals has been emphasised as one that has immense social benefit: 'Higher education is a public good because it provides the human goods of capability, reason and purposefulness' (Nixon, 2011: 68). Whilst this may seem a lofty sentiment, it resonates with many scholars. A place in society that is open to free discussion, and which instils the values of such a place in those who move through it, is invaluable, and from this perspective the purpose of a higher education should be the self-improvement of the individual with this longer view: the privilege of undertaking an education places the responsibility on the student (and academics) to use this education for the good of society (Harland and Pickering, 2011: 85).

This view of higher education as a liberal instrument for social good is one that jars somewhat with the policies and languages of subsequent governments from the 1980s onwards. As the influence of neoliberal political theory in the UK has grown, so has the emphasis from government on the needs of the individual as a useful member of society, rather than a more amorphous commitment to social responsibility through institutions trusted with safeguarding the public good, universities included (Olsson & Peters, 2005). Emphasis and, following from this, funding priority is placed on the institutions and services that are recognised as serving a purpose and represent good ‘value’ for money. In this vein, the primary purpose of the university has been reframed as one that is ultimately economic: a highly educated populace will stimulate economic growth through innovation and technological advances. This is highlighted starkly in the current position of the government brief for universities being rolled into the portfolio of the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (Harris, 2012: 22)[[2]](#footnote-2), the website for which states that it 'is the department for economic growth’. DBIS insists that it ‘invests in skills and education to promote trade, boost innovation and help people to start and grow a business.' (DBIS, 2014). Put simply, investment in education for a neoliberal government is an investment in future economic growth. It seems, then, that the purpose of higher education has shifted from being for the public good in a general, societal sense, to one that means economic value in the sense of specifically fuelling business. It is this shift in definition of purpose that has shaped, and largely been achieved through, radical changes in the UK higher education sector over the last 20 years.

**The Past 20 Years in Higher Education**

Whilst not necessarily aimed at changing the purpose of a university education, the combined impact of interrelated changes within and pertaining to the higher education sector over the past 20 years has severely affected the perceived value and purpose of a university education, what it consists of and how it is delivered. One of the biggest changes to higher education in the last 20 years has been the expansion of the sector, with the ultimate goal that 50% of young people should benefit from higher education (Hussey and Smith, 2010: 10). This expansion was begun as early as the 1960s, and should be welcomed: widening participation would lead to a better educated population, reaping the social and economic benefits this would bring, as well as opening up the opportunity to gain the substantial individual benefits of a higher education to a wider pool of society (Hussey and Smith, 2010: 1). Mass participation in higher education therefore sits well with views of both the economic and social purposes of education, and in itself is a welcome move. Yet whilst mass participation in higher education is a good principle, it brings with it a raft of issues concerned with the implementation of this expansion. Most prominent is the issue of funding this expanded sector, but the maintenance of standards across institutions whilst a diversity of learners take up their educations is also a major consideration.

Nearly all of the changes made in the last 20 years to address these concerns can be seen as the implementation of a neoliberal agenda that has been instigated by both Labour and Conservative governments. Above all, the expanded higher education sector has, in line with these principles, been largely marketised in the style of the privatisation of other previously public institutions (e.g. railways, prisons), on the principle that increased competition, for both students and research funding, between providers of higher education would increase the quality of the products (education, research outputs) on offer (Olsson & Peters, 2005). Whether this has in fact occurred, and whether the changes introduced to achieve this have brought welcome changes to the purpose of a university education, is discussed in the following sections.

*Tuition Fees*

The issue of how to fund the continuation of the expansion begun in the 1960s was one of the foci of the Dearing Report, commissioned by a Conservative government in 1996 and delivered to a Labour government in 1997 (NCIHE, 1997). One of its key recommendations was that students should contribute partially to the cost of their education (£1000 per year after graduation). Prior to this, students were supported by maintenance grants: the provision of higher education was an investment by the government in the impact of these educations on society and the economy as a whole, consistent with the themes previously discussed of the social value of universities. The Dearing Report did not abandon this government commitment, however, as it did not advocate the complete transference of costs to the individual student. Instead it recommended that maintenance grants remain, and called for an increase in government spending on education (NCIHE, 1997). Yet these recommendations were only adopted in part, as the then government introduced the fees as means-tested up-front payment, removed maintenance grants and introduced student loans (DfEE, 1998). Subsequent reviews and legislation have raised these fees to their current level of £9,000 per year from 2012/13, paid back following graduation. Accompanying this rise in fees, and to a large extent driving and justifying their enthusiastic uptake by universities, was the removal of a significant portion of the government funds granted to universities to provide higher education (DBIS, 2011).

This introduction of fees and cuts to the teaching budget marked a major transformation in the official purpose of a university education as viewed by the government. The introduction of these fees was justified on the premise that students would benefit (primarily, but not solely, financially) from a university education, and thus should assume responsibility for some, if not all, of the financial investment required to provide that education (Molesworth *et al.,* 2005). In relieving itself of much of the financial burden of investment in higher education, the government effectively personalised the purpose of this education: from one that was more outward looking, concerned with the benefits it could bring to society, to one that was primarily personal in terms of supplying a qualification that would bring economic benefit to the individual, and through their entrepreneurial actions, benefit to the economy. This is consistent with the neoliberal emphasis of the state serving the needs of the individual, whose success then benefits society, rather than being concerned with benefiting society itself (Olsson and Peters, 2005). In moving the financial responsibility for education to the private individual, higher education was commodified, that is, was made a product to be purchased (Nixon, 2011:10).

*The Student as Consumer*

The re-positioning of the student as a consumer of higher education radically alters the relationship between the student, the university, the staff who teach them, and the courses that are offered. With students incurring up to £45,000 of debt to undertake a university education, the quality and usefulness of the product purchased becomes of foremost concern. At an initial level, for those who deem that this is still a fair price to pay for education (and there are some who do not, or cannot, pay and will forgo university), they may think harder about what kinds of higher education will allow them to recoup their investment. For example, Engineering may seem a more attractive prospect than English because it is more immediately 'useful' to an economically-focussed society and job market (Chan *et al.,* 2014). Once the degree is selected, students used to 'playing the system' of consumer culture may look to further reduce the risk of not recovering their investment by selecting courses that are not necessarily easier, but safer in their guarantee of good outcomes, rather than those which will encourage the development of more risky, independent thinking (Molesworth *et al.,* 2005). In the commodification of higher education, the degree becomes something to be gained through the collection of a series of modules - its purpose becomes more of a qualification than an education, focussed on the outcome rather than on the process of learning (Hussey and Smith, 2011: 31).

The role of students as a consumer of an education that is provided by a university operating within a marketplace arguably situates the student in a considerable position of power. In the atmosphere of a competitive market for education, the consumer (which can be in the main considered as the student, but could also be extended to include the government) decides whether the product is fit for purpose (Cooper, 2002). Accordingly, mechanisms such as the National Student Survey fuel this evaluation and, given their prominence in the information presented to prospective students, universities cannot dismiss them. This is not to say that such data is irrelevant - retaining an eye on the experience of students should be at the heart of all educational institutions. Yet allowing the student as a consumer to begin to define the terms of the education they receive, through these systems of feedback and the publication of these surveys to prospective students, sets a dangerous precedent. Despite dearly-held pedagogic aims of maintaining a broad-based education and curriculum, course leaders need to compete for students, making their modules attractive and potentially easy to pass, and distorting the purpose of higher education to providing what students want at a market rate (Molesworth *et al.,* 2005). Students are not, however, best placed to decide what would constitute a university education in a field - those best placed are the professional academics who are fully immersed within the current state of the field, and the role of the academic cannot be reduced to a salesperson serving a customer who is always right (Hussey and Smith, 2011: 49).

*Government Regulation and Management of Higher Education*

Regulation of the higher education market has not been left solely to student assessment. The recognition of the importance of higher education as a means for economic and social wellbeing means that it cannot be left wholly to be evaluated by market forces in the form of student satisfaction, and here we might pause over other instruments of assessment, standardisation and regularisation such as the QAA, HEFCE, or the work of the REF.

In principle, some kind of regulation of the higher education industry, with a view to maintaining standards of scholarly enquiry and research, is not one that is negative. It is more the way in which this regulation and assessment has been, and is, guided by principles of 'bureaucratic accountability' that is problematic (Nixon, 2011:43). Imposition of external measures of standards again mirrors wider trends in neoliberal concepts of the nature of professions; professions are not to be trusted to police their own standards, as they are self-interested and therefore 'indulge in rent-seeking behaviour' which should be monitored and curbed (Olssen and Peters, 2005: 325). The fact that this constant interrogation of methods, knowledge and learning is the cornerstone of the purpose of universities and the education they provide is not considered enough to maintain standards effectively. Academics, like the student consumers, therefore must learn how to ‘play the game’ in terms of balancing the evaluation of universities, by both students and bodies such as the QAA, with maintaining academic integrity and safeguarding the non-economic purposes of education.

These methods of measuring standards, as well as demoralising professional academics, therefore also have an impact on the education that universities provide (Hussey and Smith, 2011: 21). The ideal of a liberal education, outlined at the opening of the present article, as an exposure within universities to the construction of and challenging of knowledge, is less easily measureable than, say, the achievement of a set of learning outcomes defined at the session, module and degree level that are well-placed to measure the acquisition of specific skill or knowledge sets (Nixon, 2012: 90). With a trend towards measuring comes a trend away from those things that cannot be measured or audited easily, and as such little emphasis is placed on the personal development so beloved of the traditional liberal view of higher education (Jones & Thomas 2003). However insidious this trend to measurement seems, it cannot be avoided as the government has pledged to ask universities to make the results of these measurements available to student consumers to further inform their choice of which education to purchase (DBIS, 2011). Added to this, the rise of the culture of education as consisting of a series of uniform blocks which can be measured and compared across institutions has a wider context in the movements towards the idea of students moving across international boundaries. Policies such as the Bologna Process, which committed to the standardisation of higher education across Europe in order to promote comparability and ease of movement between institutions, enhance this idea of a portable, modular education (Harris, 2012: 31). Yet whilst experience of other cultures would no doubt be a welcome part of more mobile educations across the EU, its benefits may be outweighed by the resulting 'rootless' format of modules that do little to foster long-term intellectual investment in topics (Inglis, 2011).

*Universities and Business*

The final aspect of the changes in higher education that have affected its purpose in the last 20 years is the increasing emphasis on the usefulness of university educations to business and to the wider world, and the involvement of industry within this education and the functioning of universities. The opening statement of the Dearing Report outlined the purpose of education as enhancing life, and leading to the development of 'our people, our society, and our economy.’(NCIHE, 1997: 7); in response, the government proposed its goals for higher education as:

* *increasing its contribution to the economy and its responsiveness to the needs of business;*
* *collaborating more closely and effectively with other institutions and with the world of work;* (Higher Education in the 21st Century, 1998).

This explicit desire to involve the needs of industry, as well as to harness its financial reserves through partnerships between companies and universities both in the provision of education and the funding of research has continued in recent White Papers (e.g. DBIS, 2011). Whilst some degree of collaboration with industry can be mutually financially and intellectually beneficial for all parties, the merging of academic and commercial interests can impinge upon the concepts of the university and the education it provides as a space for free-thinking, independent of external influences (Shapiro, 2006: 21). At best, increased emphasis on employer influence in higher education brings the danger of placing value on a 'portfolio of skills and competences' (Harris, 2012: 25) that are identified as desirable rather than on the development of and exposure to ways of thinking. At worst, increased emphasis on the economic value of entire fields may be catastrophic to those areas of academia that cannot be directly applied to profitable enterprise, but the study of which still provides a valuable education, such as the liberal arts.

**What is the Purpose of a University Education today? What *should* it be?**

The above changes outline what appears a subtly depressing purpose for a university education. To the government, a university education should prepare the individual to contribute to fields of knowledge that are largely tied to expanding the economy of the country through 'driving innovation'. To the student, who now pays for their education, the purpose of that education may, in large part, be to gain a qualification that will bring better employment prospects and a higher salary. A university degree today is dangerously approaching, from the outside, the status of a necessary qualification for employment. It is therefore grimly ironic that, after years of increased tuition fees justified to the student through the delayed financial benefits a university education will bring, as we approach the target of 50% of young people in higher education, this education will no doubt fall in relative economic value as the supply of graduates rises. The government, however, who have transferred investment away from their budgets, will benefit from the increased use to the economy that all these graduates have. There then exists a situation in which individuals may end up paying for an education that will benefit society proportionately more than it will benefit themselves.

The need to define the purpose of higher education as something other than economic is, in light of these changes and the impacts they have had, more pressing than ever. A higher education should remain a place of thought where individuals are exposed to, develop experience of, and acquire the ability to implement, the challenging, debating and constructing of knowledge. Universities have the responsibility to provide this space for the benefit of society, and should be invested in because of this, despite cuts across public spending. Above all, a university education should foster confidence in individuals to challenge and question the major changes, such as these, which will shape the way we educate future generations. In a recent article in the Guardian, in response to news that the 'graduate premium' is losing economic value in the UK, students are advised not to go into higher education *'because it'll get them a good job*’ but rather:

*‘because reading, learning and expanding your horizons is necessary if you're going to understand what's being done to the world around you, and change your collective circumstances.' (Penny, 2014).*

This returns us to the role and purpose of a university education discussed previously as being one that can empower individuals to transform the world they live in ways that are not necessarily economically measureable, but vital to society nonetheless in their contributions to wellbeing and quality of life. It is this focus that I believe should be retained at the very core of the purpose of a university education.

The changes that have occurred in the last 20 years have not been completely negative in terms of their impact upon the purpose of a university education as serving the public good. Universities cannot, nor should they, operate in isolation from groups such as students and businesses. They cannot ossify, and must, to maintain their own standards, continually reflect on aspects of the education they provide, such as quality and methods of teaching in a manner that is relevant to the purpose of developing a 'well-rounded individual' with deep-thinking skills. Similarly, broadening the ways we, as academics, teach can only be a good thing. Yet these changes and evaluations of the purpose of higher education must be driven by an increased awareness of the issues in the higher education sector, and must come from this debate over purpose within the academy (Nixon 2012:134), rather than through external assessments of 'measurements' such as the economic benefit.

**Conclusion**

The purpose of a university education is to expose students to a research environment for the long term enrichment of their lives and society, whether they continue in academia to add to this knowledge, or whether they carry these modes of thinking into the wider world. The economic purpose of education is not one that can be dismissed - an educated workforce would have the potential to be a productive one, and this is a good reason to invest in higher education. Yet we cannot allow the demands of a neoliberal market economy to side-line the deep learning skills that constitute the main of the value of a higher education.

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2. Since this piece was written, the DBIS has been superseded (July 2016). Responsibility for higher education in the UK now falls once more under the Department for Education, with the Minister for Universities holding a joint appointment between the DoE and the newly formed Department for Business, Energy & Industrial Strategy. Research council funding, however, is controlled by the DBEIS. It remains to be seen what, if any, impact this restructuring will have on the direction of the governmental policies discussed here. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)