Is Employability Displacing Higher Education?

Simon Marginson

Abstract
Employability is becoming embedded in mass higher education with considerable moral authority. Everybody wants a job, and work is seen as a human right. However, higher education is not very effective in direct preparation for work, it cannot create jobs, and the mantra of employability blocks from view its core educational mission, which is student self-formation through immersion in knowledge. This is emerging as an existential crisis for the sector.

Recently in these pages Dirk van Damme, former head of the OECD's Centre for Educational Research and Innovation, questioned the expansion of participation in higher education. "There are pressing signs that high levels of university attainment do not have only positive effects on societies and economies," Dirk van Damme stated, noting "graduate underemployment, overqualification, mismatches, and substitution effects." More promising, he said, is "the rapidly expanding interest in short programs and nontraditional certifications such as microcredentials."

Van Damme's OECD colleague Andreas Schleicher, OECD director for education and skills, agrees. Microcredentials "get employers better signals of what people know and can do," he argued in London in March 2023, again comparing them favorably with universities. For universities, life is "actually very comfortable," he said. "You bundle content, delivery, accreditation—you can get quite a nice monopoly rent." Shifting to microcredentials would mean that provider status no longer matters. It seems that microcredentials are the new route to equity.

It is hard to believe that combining degrees for the middle class with microcredentials for the masses is going to create social equity, but evidence is mounting that economically inclined policy makers are losing patience with higher education as we know it.

The United Kingdom's Teaching Excellence Framework compares the quality of student learning in different institutions and disciplines on the basis of graduate salaries. It has stigmatized some programs as "low value courses" because graduate salaries are below average. In Australia, the national government calls for "job-ready graduates" and has funded the development of programs leading to microcredentials.

In each case the diagnosis of the problem and the solution are the same. Higher education should be primarily (or solely) and directly vocational. The idea of "job-ready graduates" sums this up. But higher education is not fit for this particular purpose. Preparation for work is one of its missions but has never been the core mission. Still less is it the only mission. Higher education is not primarily the formation of "employable" graduates. It is the cultural formation of persons through immersion in discipline-based knowledge. Students are formed—or rather, form themselves—through deep learning in various academic and professional fields. It is knowledge, not employability, that unifies higher education.

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Intrinsic and Extrinsic Missions

Higher education has multiple missions, as Clark Kerr famously argued in tagging universities as "multiversities." There are two kinds of missions: intrinsic and extrinsic.

The *intrinsic missions*—the classical core of higher education—are the education of students, and the transmission, creation and dissemination of knowledge. These missions shape the internal organization of the sector. Teaching and learning, and scholarship and research, are grounded in epistemic disciplines, study programs and departments/schools. The two intrinsic missions are intertwined. Learning is knowledge-intensive. The nexus between teaching and research/scholarship is a norm of academic identity and work. The value of these intrinsic activities is measured not by policy, markets or social impact but internally, using educational tools like exams, grading, peer review, and academic quality assurance.

There have been several forms of higher education in history. They have differed in many ways but all have shared the same intrinsic core. In China, the Western Zhou dynasty (1047–771 BCE) prepared scholar-officials through deep learning of key texts. In the Library and Mouseion at Alexandria, in Buddhist monasteries in Northern India like Vikramshila and Nalanda, in Mediterranean Islamic scholarship, in medieval European universities beginning with Bologna in 1088 CE, in every iteration of the institution from Kant and von Humboldt to John Henry Newman to the American research university, which started with Johns Hopkins in 1876, all have prepared students through cultural immersion in knowledge and scholarship.

In its intrinsic core, higher education functions as "socialization" and "subjectification," as Gert Biesta put it in 2009. Socialization means the inculcation of social and occupational norms. Subjectification refers to the "individuating" effect of education, whereby students become self-realizing 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. In this way higher education prepares students for the whole of life, including work.

Higher education also has *extrinsic missions*, which it carries out in partnership with other social sectors, including government, employers, the professions, and local communities. Biesta refers to the educational function of "qualification," learning how to do things, especially in the workplace. In the extrinsic domain, external agents help to determine the value of the activity. Here, graduate salaries and rates of employment are in play.

However, economic policy often focuses solely on extrinsic preparation for work, as if the other missions do not exist. Microcredentials reduce higher education to qualification and break that up into fragments distributed on a piece-by-piece basis.

Education and Work

If economic policy set out to design higher education from the ground up focused solely on employable graduates, it would not use cultural formation, academic knowledge and the teaching/research nexus as building blocks. But societies want more from higher education.

Studies repeatedly find that most students have multiple objectives in higher education. They want personal development, *and* immersion in disciplinary knowledge, *and* graduate jobs; it is not either/or. During the years of study many students are involved in work as well as education. But we should not blur the distinctions between education and employment. They are different worlds. Agentic positioning, objectives, values, knowledge sets and skills, and required behaviors, are different. Training in skills and employability is more effective in the workplace itself. Accepting the heterogeneity of education and work is the first step in improving the transitions and combinations between education and work.

Even in many occupational courses transition to work 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.

Higher education sits between schooling and work. It is more like schooling than work. But economic policy wants it to replicate work and to value it in the same terms as work.

Intrinsic and Extrinsic Missions Set Against Each Other

A gulf has opened up between the intrinsic educational function and the vocational expectations of policy and media. It was not necessary to position the intrinsic education as in conflict with the extrinsic contribution, or to present vocational skills and academic knowledge as zero-sum. But policy makers in Australia and the United Kingdom, as well as in some other countries, are making firm attempts to install the human capital imaginary, the extrinsic job preparation mission, not alongside but in place of the intrinsic educational mission.

Employability is becoming embedded in mass higher education with considerable moral authority. Everybody wants a job, and work is seen as a human right. However, higher education is not very effective in direct preparation for work and cannot create jobs—and the mantra of employability blocks from view its core educational mission, which is student self-formation through immersion in knowledge. The idea of "job-ready graduates" also creates unachievable expectations. I think this is emerging as an existential crisis for the sector. ◢

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