Is Higher Education Worth It?

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How did we get here?

As I write, headlines scream out (again) questioning the value of higher education (HE). *The New York Times* says "Americans Are Losing Faith in the Value of College" (Tough, 2023; see also McGuire, 2023 for Ireland and *The Economist*, 2023 for the UK). *Inside Higher Ed* reports that Obama-era disclosure requirements for all academic programs, which resulted in the *College Scorecard*, are to be strengthened by the Biden administration (Knott, 2023a, 2023b). The UK government is questioning what it calls "low-value courses" (Department of Education, 2023). The OECD reports that alternative credentials are on the rise; these have a "near-term potential to become a substitute for some formal post-secondary education qualifications" (Kato et al., 2020, p35) while other reports suggest employers are already moving beyond university credentials. In different ways, these reports signal concerns about HE's relevance and the quality assurance/accreditation process (Clark et al., 2023; Debroy & de Castillo, 2023; Grove, 2019; Lanahan, 2022; SHRM, n.d.; The Editorial Board, 2023).

The debate about the value and contribution of higher education to individuals and society is not a new phenomenon. Issues take different forms in each country but essentially, HE is accused of being insufficiently accountable to students and society for learning outcomes, graduate attributes, and life-sustaining skills in exchange for the funding and public/political support they receive. While measuring and comparing government activity stretches back to the foundations of the modern nation-state and the process of statecraft in the late 19th century, focus on higher education is a relatively new dimension.

Public trust in peer review and self-reporting has arguably protected it from external scrutiny heretofore. But times have changed, and there is limited tolerance for professional self-governance. We now talk about learning outcomes, research and societal impact, civic engagement, employability and skills (and relevance), and more recently the contribution of HE to the Sustainable Development Goals, climate challenge, the green agenda, etc. An assemblage of methods, processes and instruments for assessing, measuring, and demonstrating the full breadth of what higher education does continues to evolve. Processes and instruments such as quality assurance, qualification frameworks, accreditation, audits, performance agreements, research and teaching assessments, peer learning and

benchmarking, and rankings are embedded in our daily discourse and practices (Hazelkorn, 2023b).

In response to this changing dynamic, an expansive and expanding literature from across academic, government, policy, and sectoral interests, domestic and international, has emerged discussing, justifying, questioning, and critiquing the rationale, concepts, methodologies, and policy instruments. Marginson and Yang acknowledge (p138) that each sector and interest group looks upon these issues in different ways: while educators focus on "the broader person-forming role", universities emphasize the contribution to communities and policymakers focus on graduate employability and salaries – otherwise known as return-on- (personal and societal) investment or ROI. As scholars, we engage in the complexities and explain why simple solutions distort. But, to everyone else – as the saying goes – when you are explaining you are losing.

Enter *Assessing the Contributions of Higher Education. Knowledge for a Disordered World* – a vital and timely contribution to a debate that is rising in intensity around the world with big implications for higher education. Across 14 chapters, eighteen authors collectively and individually explore what higher education "does for persons, organisations, communities, cities, nations and the world…what difference does it make [and] and how do we know" (p1). The fundamental intention throughout is to disentangle the breadth of higher education's endeavours from a narrow human capital theory interpretation which places an over-determinist focus on employment and employability as the predominant (only?) benchmark of personal success and societal contribution. Unpeeling the onion, different authors take different aspects – e.g., global science, climate crisis, culture, public policy and elite formation – to demonstrate how non-economic contributions and benefits have effectively been crowded out (chapter 3).

Acquiring knowledge and skills – formally recognised by way of qualifications and credentials – is "the most important outcome … [for] students and graduates" but they are simply part of a much richer and more complex environment. At the individual level, higher education's most profound contribution is self-formation, effectively transforming students into "self-determining agents" more readily able to make existential choices. In so doing, Marginson et al argue, "higher education weakens the effects of economic determinism on their imagining and choices about mobility" and life (p34). HE opens up new ways of thinking and opportunities hitherto unforeseen, unknown or unavailable. In turn, HE itself makes an extensive and expansive contribution to global common goods – thus adopting UNESCO's concept (chapters 8 and 10). Not only does higher education research push the boundaries of knowledge, discovery and innovation with immediate and longer-term benefits and impacts for all humankind, but it also helps shape the values which underpin our societies.

The book offers a rich tapestry of perspectives and case studies each of which explores different dimensions of how, and to what effect, higher education makes a contribution. By drawing on a wide-ranging literature, the contributors collectively add significantly to our understanding of the complexities of the issues – but borrowing from sporting parlance, many questions have been left on the field. This of course is what scholarly work should do – as Jones states upfront: there is "no ambition to provide a definitive, detailed portrait of what is in reality a complex array of interactions within unique historical, cultural, social and political contexts….[rather] the central aim…is to frame and illuminate" (p 244).

What do we mean by the "contribution of higher education"?

Assessing the Contributions of Higher Education is a welcome rebuttal to simplistic efforts to reduce complexity to a few quantitative indicators. Not only do graduates possess a broader knowledge base, advanced analytical capacities and complex communications skills alongside specialised skills but they also enjoy higher incomes, more opportunities and better health. They are likely to be more interested in politics and public affairs, participate more actively in civil society, and be more trusting and supportive of other people. Good outcomes for individuals have positive impacts and benefits for family life, health, crime prevention, citizenship, civic engagement, social justice and public discourse (Lumina Foundation and Gallup, 2023). Equally important, the benefits of higher education "are not limited to people who are or have been students" but extend across society (Brennan, Durazzi, & Séné, 2013, p. 18). It is not lost on this reviewer that espousal of the view that universities contribute to "envisioning…new social structures and to democratic development" (p211) is precisely why it is attracting so much adverse attention from politicians and right-wing populists from Hungary to Florida and beyond (Altbach & de Wit, 2023).

In moving beyond a reductionist interpretation of human capital theory, the book is making an important and much-needed contribution. As Robson argues, this requires a reconceptualization of the labour market from a linear to a dynamic model building upon research which shows that "issues of skills mismatch, oversupply, undersupply, and weak labour markets are often best tackled through skills policies that are integrated with demand-side interventions… (p189). But doubling down on self-formation doesn't lessen the import of employment and employability or lessen higher education's responsibilities. As a European cross-country study indicates, students believe a "key purpose of higher education is to prepare them for labour market entry" (Brooks et al., 2021, p1383).

Studies also indicate that opinions about the benefits of higher education vary according to individual social status, the status of the institution attended and/or education level achieved (Clark et al., 2023; Lumina Foundation and Gallup, 2023). Value is contextualised in relation to the wider issue of whether it enhances one's social mobility and widens opportunities or it does not (Alonso, 2023; Chronicle of Higher Education, 2016). A Lumina/Gallup survey (2023, p4) found that "the positive effects of education tend to be greater for cognitive ability, income and work-related outcomes". Brown et al. (2020, p214) similarly observes that a person's ability to take advantage of the "'art of life' still depends on the act of making a living."

To what extent are we confusing self-formation with the social capital advantages which students have gained prior to entering higher education? To what extent are these "effects" more likely to be impacted by outside variables rather than "causation" from attending higher education? Kuh and Pascarella (2004, p56) warn that

> failure to control for such student pre-college characteristics could lead to the conclusion that differences in reported student experiences are institutional effects when, in fact, they may be simply the result of differences in the characteristics of the students enrolled at the different institutions.

If the "contribution HE makes to an individual's employment outcomes… is rooted in the value that students and graduates place on their employability themselves" (p.191), then how do we assess the contribution that higher education is actually making?

The evidence may not be all that positive. OECD argues that “it is in the teaching of more generic critical thinking skills where universities can make the most difference” (Williams, 2022). PIACC, the Survey of Adult Skills (PIAAC),[1] shows that higher education is failing many in this fundamental area. A sizeable proportion of adults in some countries have poor reading, numeracy and problem-solving skills, and significant numbers have limited experience with computers. These findings are confirmed in *Does Higher Education Teach Students to Think Critically?* which shows “across countries, 20% of students performed at the lowest mastery level while 15% of students performed at ‘accomplished’ and ‘advanced’ mastery levels” (van Damme & Zahner, 2022, p259; see also Arum & Roksa, 2010).

Assessing the Contributions of Higher Education claims to extend the argument of self-formation to all tertiary education (p2-3) – but does it really? Tertiary education is a wide-ranging term used to describe the educational landscape of post-secondary schooling, what the Bologna Framework refers to as the Third Cycle (Hazelkorn, 2023a). It is used increasingly, replacing higher education, “to reflect the growing diversity of institutions and programmes” (Santiago et al., 2008, 25; see also Unangst, 2017, p24). As the shift to tertiary gains wider prominence amongst the policy and scholarly communities, there is a tendency to morph our conceptualisations and sometimes the data to fit the new discourse. That tertiary and the myriad qualifications can be understood differently depending upon the jurisdiction encourages the inclination to simplify the language.

Critically, there is an implicit hierarchy in the way in which higher education incorporates tertiary (rather than vice versa) – setting up what Blackman (2022) refers to as a “zero-sum game” in which “academic” higher education is the only path to success. Historically, there was a tendency to see skills and knowledge as distinct bodies of “activity” ascribed to institutions according to whether they provided vocational/professional or academic learning. However, today, there is a growing and deeper appreciation that skills and knowledge production are interdependent and iterative elements of a dynamic innovation system; a knowledge base underpins all skills formation. UNESCO has highlighted the importance of equipping all learners with the “knowledge, know-how, skills and/or competences required in particular occupations or more broadly in the labour market” (UNESCO-UNEVOC, 1995; Cedefop, 2014, p30, 94).

If methodological nationalism “blocks out features of other cultures”, are we experiencing a methodological higher education that effectively conceives of higher education – and usually only research universities – “as the sole unit of analysis or as a container for social processes” (Lazëri, 2020)? Is the argument that only HE (used throughout as a collective noun) provides these contributions – or only some types of institutions? And what about other forms of knowledge? Do the benefits that purport to come from higher education extend to all forms of post-secondary education?

Bringing it all together

Identifying the complex interplay of the different dimensions of higher education’s contributions offer an important way forward but it also presents the authors with a further challenge. Tables 2.1 (p31), 3.1 (p52) and 10.1 (p212), and Figure 2.1 (p33) attempt to create

[1] The PIAAC 2nd Cycle of the Survey of Adult Skills (PIAAC) is taking place from 2018-2024 with the participation of over 30 countries/economies. Data collection will take place in 2022-2023 and the results will be published in 2024.

a single framework to conceptualise the full breadth of higher education's contributions. In different ways, they embrace a transformative agenda: knowledge creation and transformed knowledge, and personality creation and transformed personality (p51) nested within national and global dimensions. Case studies are helpful, assisting us to get behind and beyond the theoretical or generic, but evidence is required. Indeed, it's not clear if the full objectives of the book have been met; "how do we know" if HE is contributing?

If we want to move beyond the simplistic, how can we translate and use the ideas in the book to shift the public and policy discourse? Student and graduate agency is a complex concept to demonstrate especially given the arguments above – and is a much more opaque concept than linking graduate outcomes to a programme with employability data. Can the authors translate these frameworks from a theoretical conceptual framework into a usable tool for higher education institutions and governments but also for learners of all ages and the wider public? Rather than proclaiming what higher education does, can we demonstrate this in a way that avoids the overreach of endless quantitative indicators – and answers questions people legitimately have about which institution and course of study, and about value for money? What people want to know is how effectively students are learning, what they are achieving, and how personnel, institutions and the systems overall help students to succeed. Whatever the shortcomings of human capital theory, telling people their education has facilitated self-formation is not sufficiently tangible.

The book presents a rosy and positive picture of higher education's contributions. But, is there a converse view that we must genuinely explore and undertake with the same vigour and rigour? To what extent is HE itself contributing to people being "firmly marginalised"(p3) and/or the loss of trust and public and political support? Despite massification, the system, our institutions and its practices have remained relatively unchanged as if they were still catering for a small elite. Is higher education "its own worst enemy" (Greenberg, 2023)?

In conclusion, *Assessing the Contributions of Higher Education* is a giant step forward – pulling all the diverse pieces together and helping us understand the whole picture. That is exactly the role of scholarly endeavour. What might seem contrary to what I have said above, the conceptualisation and the attempts at a framework have been the most impactful for me. But, having set this out, the challenge is to help us move to the next step.

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