

**Consultation on Further and Higher Education and the Sustainable Development Goals: St George's House, Windsor Castle
Thursday January 25th and Friday January 26th 2018**

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This paper is a write-up of a short presentation given at the above event, in response to the question:

What is the purpose of tertiary education?

1 CRITICAL CONTEXT

I intend to set out a bold and concise argument in seven keypoints and five slides.

Some quotes are memorable. In 1971, I came across this quote from Paul Valéry:


'The trouble with our times is that the future is not what it used to be.'

If it was true then, it can also be seen as prescient - and ringing even more true today.

Here's the first slide, showing the keypoints.

Further and Higher Education and the Sustainable Development Goals
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- 1 Critical context
- 2 Response from HE
- 3 Urgent questions
- 4 Paradigm, purpose, policy and practice
- 5 Four purposes of education
- 6 Shifting purposes over time
- 7 Re-purposing Higher and Further Education



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The argument is based on my decades of involvement in this field, including the last 12 years championing sustainability at Plymouth University.

Last week, I was walking down a shopping aisle when the cover of the *New Scientist* caught my eye. It posed a question 'The writing on the wall?' and the associated article inside was entitled:

'End of days: Is Western civilisation on the brink of collapse?'

It began:

'Scientists, historians and politicians alike have begun to warn that Western culture is reaching a critical juncture. Cycles of inequality and resource use are heading for a tipping point that in many past civilisations precipitated political unrest, war and finally collapse.'

'For the most part, though, people are carrying on as usual, shopping for their next holiday or posing on social media'.

2 (INADEQUATE) RESPONSE FROM HE

It seems to me that not only are people 'carrying on as usual' in such ways, but so is further and higher education. There *is* undoubtedly excellent work happening in FHE teaching and research which is aligned with sustainability and SD issues, but this work is on the margins of mainstream agendas.

As an academic, you receive countless invitations to conferences and seminars. But it is very unusual to see *any reference at all* to broader contexts, to global trajectories, to the kinds of futures that graduates will enter and need to manage within.

Rather there seems to be an unstated assumption that the future is stable and given.

I find this baffling. How can sound judgements about educational policies and purposes be made in the absence of full account taken of profound contextual trends and shifts in society and environment?

And there are more urgent questions... the sorts I've been asking for the past 40+ years...

3 URGENT QUESTIONS

- What kinds of education *are* appropriate for the kinds of conditions of unsustainability, uncertainty, and complexity we find ourselves experiencing - and how can this best be brought about?
- How can we be sufficiently radical and far-reaching, but also realistically practical?

These questions are much more to the fore - now that the SDGs present a profound challenge to HE, not least through the work of UNESCO - with whom I have worked for many years.

In 2016, UNESCO's annual *Global Monitoring Report* on the state of education worldwide, for the first time focussed on education in relation to sustainable development.

It states, 'A huge transformation is needed if we are to create sustainable futures for all.'

In the same year, the UK government produced its White Paper on HE entitled, tellingly, *Success as a knowledge economy*. Though it has proven transformative in terms of its effect on the sector, it's not the kind of transformation that UNESCO had in mind!

4 PARADIGM, PURPOSE, POLICY AND PRACTICE

This is because the White Paper paper emerged from an economic paradigm, and this then gives rise to *purpose*, *policy* and *practice* and associated discourse that is logically consistent with the ethos and platform that this foundation provides (see slide).



I argue that the marketisation of education, informed by neoliberal ideology is both a control paradigm and an economic paradigm which does not serve us well - constraining rather than liberating the creativity, critical thought and collaboration that achieving the SDGs requires.

Against this, sustainability education practice can be rather like building an ecohouse on unsupportive foundations (see slide).

So let's now look at 'purpose'.

5 THE FOUR PURPOSES OF (HIGHER) EDUCATION

Definitions of purpose in HE have always shown a tension between a grounding in *intrinsic values* (developing the individual, deepening understanding and inquiry for its own sake), or in *instrumental values* (as in educating for an outcome).

The first orientation is in practice consistent with institutional autonomy and diversity of practice, the second with political influence and control, and standardisation.

What we have seen in the last 30 years or more, is a swing towards instrumental values, particularly as they relate to economic outcomes, evidenced by the rise of the global testing culture.

This represents a *narrowing* of perception and conception of education – a *squeeze* - with the vocational purpose now dominant, supported by what has been called the 'Global Education Industry'.

This slide suggests four main purposes and functions of education.

Purposes of education

- Socialisation Function** —to replicate society and culture
- Vocational Function** —to prepare people for employment
- Liberal Humanist Function** —to develop the potential of individuals
- Transformative Function**—to facilitate change towards a more equitable society and a better world (improve quality of life fo).

- Sterling (2001): 25

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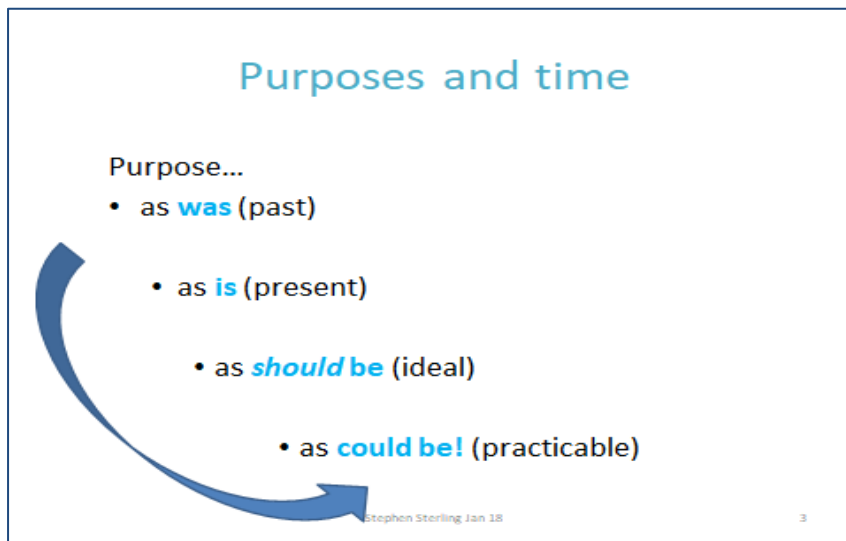
I argue that given global conditions, the *transformative function* should be uppermost, with the other three seen as important subsets *which would then themselves look very different, aligned to the need for social change.*

This proposition invites a perspective over time.....

6 SHIFTING PURPOSES OVER TIME

Over my four decades of professional engagement, I would say there has been a shift from an intrinsic values view of education which had much more currency in the past, and when I was training as a teacher, towards a much more instrumental view in the present.

So it's helpful to consider the purpose of HE 'as was', transitioning over time to purpose 'as is'. But then to consider purpose as it 'might be', or 'should be' – which would involve the re-visioning and integrating of all four purposes.



So the '**should be** (ideal)' invites a broadening and deepening of educational vision which integrates intrinsic and instrumental views into a more holistic framework.

But then of course, it's a matter of making this work, which is the 'could be', the practicable path. Which is a significant challenge of course.

7 RE-PURPOSING FURTHER AND HIGHER EDUCATION

But this takes us to the idea of 're-purposing higher education', an idea which is beginning to achieve currency. And this gets interesting!

Donella Meadows - writing on systems change - notes that changing the purpose or goals of a system has the power to effect systemic change throughout the system, secondary only to paradigm shift (Meadows 2009).

And, as I wrote in a book chapter last year:

'...after decades of arguing for a change of educational paradigm towards something more holistic, systemic, humanistic and ecological, I fully understand that the realisation and internalisation of different educational paradigms by individuals, institutions and educational communities is extraordinarily challenging. But a change of purpose - or embrace of additional purpose in the first instance - is possible at micro, meso and macro levels and can be a harbinger of a deeper cultural shift, especially when aligned with and connected to growing progressive and reconstructive movements in civil society.' (Sterling, 2017).

I was asked a couple of years back by the International Association of Universities (IAU) for a pithy definition of 'purpose' of HE as I would want to see it. I came up with this (see slide).

Re-purposing higher education

"(Higher) Education is no longer preparation for an assumed stable future but a nurturing of individual and collective potential to live well and skillfully in an already complex and volatile world, towards human and planetary betterment."

- Stephen Sterling

<http://www.iau-hesd.net/en/contenu/189-what-higher-education-and-research-sustainable-development-hesd.html>

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This chimes with what Christina Escrigas (2016) in a paper of the same name calls 'A higher calling for higher education'. This necessitates an enlarging of vision, and of sense of purpose from that which currently prevails.

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References

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