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AI Acknowledgement

~~I confirm that I have not used any AI tools in the research and creation of this assignment.~~

I confirm that I have not presented any AI generated materials as my own work.

I confirm that I have copies of my drafts, notes, and other resources I used, which I may be asked to provide in evidence.

I acknowledge the use of Elicit https://elicit.com/ on March 15th, March 18th, and March 20th 2025 to assist with finding research papers relevant to the assignment. Elicit is a GenAI tool, rather than a simple search engine, because it produces summaries of the literature and extracts certain data with follow-up prompts. I used the prompt(s):

1. Please find papers on the purpose of higher education. Include both seminal works and more current papers.

2. What are the key differences in the scholarship of learning and teaching across different academic disciplines and institutional contexts?

3. Find papers on the professional identities of higher education practitioners. Please find recent papers.

I confirm that I have not presented any AI generated text as my own work.

I confirm that I have copies of my drafts, notes, and other resources I used before and after the use of AI tools which I may be asked to provide in evidence.

HIGHER EDUCATION PRACTITIONERS' PERCEPTIONS OF THE PURPOSE OF HIGHER EDUCATION AND THE DEVELOPMENT OF PROFESSIONAL IDENTITY

AIM, FOCUS AND PURPOSE OF THE RESEARCH

This research aims to investigate the perceptions of academic staff at a United Kingdom (U.K.) post-92 university concerning the broad essential role of higher education in a global societal context, and of their own identities and place within that context.

In my own role, as part of a quality enhancement department delivering staff training and development related to the practice of learning and teaching, I observe varying levels of engagement from academics with this training. For those on the 'front line', engaged in teaching and/or research, there can be a myriad of reasons for the engagement or otherwise with continuous professional development (CPD) offerings, ranging from individual personal circumstances, workload expectations, the timing of events, and years of experience and confidence.

One factor affecting engagement with development may be an individual's worldviews and values (Smith and Wyness 2024), and their conception of the role and purpose of higher education. Much of the contemporary discourse, at least in the quality enhancement field, is influenced by broad societal, and even global considerations. This is evident, for example, through the fact that the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) has been updating its Subject Benchmark Statements to specifically consider how disciplines address the wider social objectives of equality, diversity and inclusion (EDI), accessibility, Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) and employability, entrepreneurship and enterprise education (Quality Assurance Agency n.d.).

These present-day considerations chime with Freire's (1964) notion that the purpose of education is pursuit of the 'ontological vocation to be more fully human' (p.74). Yet, for some academics, these broader goals may be overshadowed by the more personal aim of achieving status and recognition through research and publication (Smith and Wyness 2024). It will be instructive to all those involved in the

enhancement of learning and teaching, whether in regulatory, development or teaching roles, to take a reflective step back – in a time of uncertainty and competing pressures (House of Lords Library n.d.; Scope Ratings 2024) – and to consider the societal relevance and value of higher education.

LITERATURE REVIEW

This literature review will first take an overview of some of the prevailing theories and recent discourse about the purpose of a university education, particularly in the U.K., before turning to what has been written about academics and their professional identities, and then finally to what has been termed the 'Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL), since it is this scholarship that largely reflects priorities for the development of higher academic practitioners, and the overall direction of travel of the higher education sector itself.

THE PURPOSE OF HIGHER EDUCATION

Much of the literature on the role of higher education in the twenty-first century has emphasised the growing pressures from various external sources, and the consequent loss an of identity and purpose for higher education (Barnett 2004; Bryson 2004; Cribb and Gerwitz 2013; Christie 2017; Tomlinson and Watermeyer 2022). Cribb and Gerwitz (2013), for example, in their vision of 'the hollowed-out university' (p.338) point to the shift to an emphasis on STEM subjects, corporatisation, massification, the widening participation agenda, and the marketisation that has come with league tables, as having resulted in 'gloss and spin compared to academic substance' (ibid. p.338). Likewise, Christie (2017) is critical of the proliferation of information presented uncritically to prospective students through the media in a consumer-oriented university culture.

This concern for the loss of identity and purpose for higher education is echoed in the current literature that recognises a growing emphasis on the economic purpose (Ashwin 2020; Sterling 2021; Trinidad *et al.* 2021) and the teaching of generic skills (Star and Hammer 2008). Trinidad *et al.* (2021), for example, in exploring the student perspective, find that career preparation appears to be the primary focus, and

Sterling (2021) calls for an urgent shift from the dominant economic paradigm towards a holistic worldview that addresses global challenges.

Yet, there are more positive approaches that go beyond the somewhat pessimistic stance. Barnett (2004), in his widely-cited work, proposes the possibility of a 'philosophy of higher education' (p.67) – of coming to a conclusion about the purpose of a university education that goes beyond both the more traditional view of a liberal education (Nussbaum 1997) and the postmodernist instrumentalist stance (Becker 1994). He proposes, rather, that universities should embrace concerns that look to the future, and that in a world of 'radical uncertainty' (Barnett 2004, p.71), the focus must be on learning to be rather than on imparting knowledge. Highlighting the concept of 'supercomplexity' (ibid. p.71), Barnett suggests that higher education should equip students with the ability to navigate uncertainty and ambiguity, rather than simply imparting specific skills.

This emphasis on *being* is echoed by dall'Alba and Barnacle (2007), who argue for a move away from the epistemological to the ontological purpose of higher education, using Barnett's 'knowing, acting and being' (p.679) framework to summarise their vision of how a university education might transform the learner, equipping them with the necessary openness and vision to tackle global and societal concerns.

The knowing, acting and being framework has strong associations with Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) (Advance HE/QAA, 2021; Shephard, 2008; Sípos *et al.* 2008), with its emphasis on transformative learning that involves challenging existing worldviews and norms and promoting critical thinking. At its core, ESD aims to empower individuals to be informed decision-makers and responsible actors for the environment, economic stability and social justice for both present and future generations (Sterling 2004; Wals 2010; Cortese and Seif Hatton 2010; Zhou 2024). This bold aim can be viewed as encompassing the other aims of promoting equity and social justice, fostering critically informed and engaged citizens, and producing graduates with employability skills in an increasingly complex world of uncertainty.

In a study connecting this 'public role' (Mitchell 2022, p.8) of higher education with the emergence of the use of 'Grand Challenges' (p.8) in learning and assessment in higher education, Mitchell highlights the phenomenon of high-profile Grand Challenge campaigns in universities such as University College London, the University of Cambridge, the University of Exeter, Imperial College London and Princeton University. This challenge-based approach to learning is celebrated for its potential for social and

economic transformation, for serving governments and society as well as the students involved in these challenges, thus emphasising the public and service role of higher education.

We have, therefore, diametrically opposed views of the role and purpose of higher education in the current climate. On the one hand, there is the deficit model, where academic substance has been replaced by 'gloss and spin' (Cribb and Gerwitz 2013) in the face of external forces. On the other, there is the lofty ambition to solve the Grand Challenges of the day through student interdisciplinary project working, including climate change, poverty and social injustice (Sterling 2021; Mitchell 2022). Finally, there is the less extreme and more mundane acceptance that university education is largely about preparing students for the workforce (Trinidad *et al*. 2021), whether as responsible, global citizens with the drive to move forwards the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (QAA/Advance HE 2021; UNESCO 2017) or as graduates with the employability skills required for the workforce of the day (Star and Hammer 2008).

PROFESSIONAL IDENTITIES

Regarding the professional identities of higher education practitioners, the themes emerging from the literature include the teaching versus research tension, the practice versus academia tension, and the difficulty faced by professionals in this field in developing an integrated identity.

Firstly, in considering the purpose of higher education, it is important to note the influence of the Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) and Graduate Level Apprenticeships (GLA) on the one hand – demonstrating the U.K. government's commitment to a pedagogical approach and the economic purpose of higher education (Pilcher et al. 2017; Gunn 2018) – and the Research Excellence Framework (REF) on the other (Tennant *et al.* 2015) – putting pressure on universities to recruit staff with a career commitment to academia. It is these two competing responsibilities, teaching and research, that inform much of the discussion in the literature on the professional identities of higher education practitioners.

Yang *et al.* (2021) provide an interesting starting point for exploring the importance of professional identity in this contextual framework of teaching versus research. Through a narrative analysis of interviews with ten Chinese higher education English teachers, they emphasise the importance of emotional resilience in negotiating an integrated professional identity, pinpointing four types of identity negotiation, including the 'disheartened performer', the 'miserable follower' and the 'strenuous accommodator', alongside the 'fulfilled integrator' (p.244). Though the study may have limited generalisability, it highlights that all

participants experienced conflict in the development of their professional identities, and that for a significant number, there was tension and anxiety in the establishment of an integrated identity. Moreover, there appears to be a clear consensus in recent literature concerned with professional identities in higher education that they are dynamic in nature (Dickinson *et al.* 2020; Howard 2020; French 2020; Veles *et al.* 2023).

Secondly, Dickinson *et al.* (2020) bring alternative dichotomous identities to the discussion in highlighting the importance of 'pracademics' (ibid. p.290) – former and current industry practitioners turned academic – in contrast to 'career academics' (ibid. p.292). They advocate for the recruitment of these pracademics who bring industry links, experience and practical skills, pointing out the particular importance of such teaching staff to universities that emphasise their vocational excellence. Their case study, gathering data from focus groups at one large U.K. post-92 university, demonstrates that for many of those involved in teaching in higher education, tensions arise not through the pressures of research grants, publication and building an identity through scholarship, but from the need to keep up with professional development in order to maintain a dual identity and relevance in teaching and preparing students for employment. This idea of the academic versus practitioner tension has received considerable attention and exploration (Dickinson *et al.* 2020; Peri *et al.* 2023; Beaton and Hope 2022; Obexer 2022), with notions of fluidity (Dickinson *et al.* 2020; Obexer 2022), instability, fragility (Peri *et al.* 2023, p.65) and the 'blended professional' (Beaton and Hope 2022; Obexer 2022, p. 467) at the forefront of the discussion.

Obexer's (2022) autoethnographical study furthers the discussion by highlighting that there is yet more to the role of a higher education practitioner than teaching, research and maintaining an industry practitioner identity: in her role at an Austrian university, she performs multiple responsibilities as 'senior lecturer, eLearning specialist and coordinator of responsible management education' (p.467). It is this 'Third Space' (Whitchurch 2008, p.377), a 'growing, but still ambiguous and hybrid space between academic and administrative roles' that according to Obexer (2022, p.468) provides opportunities for institution-wide networking, creativity, and autonomous change-making, while moving outside of the more narrow disciplinary community and feeling a loss of a sense of belonging to a team. This idea of Third Space practitioners being in a position to advocate for change and influence institutional transformation is taken up by Behari-Leak and Le Roux (2018) and moves the discussion towards more positive potentialities in the negotiation of professional identity for those in such roles, and away from notions of tension and the need for emotional resilience (Yang *et al.* 2021).

From yet another standpoint, Macfarlane (2011) writes about the emergence of the 'para-academic' (Macfarlane 2011, p.59). In contrast to Obexer's (2022) vision of the blended professional, Macfarlane (2011) sees a specialisation, or 'unbundling' (ibid. p.59) in the separation of teaching, research and service roles, with professional services staff being upskilled and academic staff being simultaneously deskilled in response to forces such as massification and the rise of technology. In this questioning of the possibility of continuing as a rounded academic performing teaching, research and service roles, Macfarlane (2011) echoes Cribb and Gerwitz's (2013) pessimistic view that there has been a 'hollowing out' (Macfarlane 2011, p.71) of academic practice.

THE SCHOLARSHIP OF TEACHING AND LEARNING (SOTL)

A third area of interest to this study is what is known as the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL). For the origins of SoTL, we can look to Boyer's theory of the four functions of scholarship, those being 'discovery' (Boyer 1997, p.17), (knowledge advancement), 'integration' (p.18), (drawing interdisciplinary connections), the 'application' of knowledge to practice (p.21), and 'teaching' (p.23). For Boyer, while teaching is often seen by academics as an additional duty, it plays a central role in his idea of scholarly activity, since the work of an academic must be understood by others before it can be of consequence.

SoTL seeks, therefore, to encourage higher education practitioners to regard their teaching as scholarly activity (Hutchings, et al. 2011), and to reflect on and improve the ways in which they promote learning for their students (Brookfield 2017). There are well-established theories and trends in pedagogical approaches that inform much of the resource base for practitioners new to the field or seeking to develop their practice (Hunt and Chalmers 2017; Fry *et al.* 2009), and a proliferation of resources provided by the Advance HE professional membership scheme (Advance HE n.d.) and the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA n.d.) on wide-ranging issues, from generative-AI and awarding gaps to employability, inclusivity, and student engagement.

In addition to conferences, events, reports and commissioned projects, the Advance HE Fellowship Scheme reflects a commitment to SoTL in its U.K. Professional Standards Framework (UKPSF), first developed by what was then the Higher Education Academy in 2006. The UKPSF's dimensions of teaching practice are designed to act as a benchmark for standards in teaching in the U.K. (Kushnir and Spowart 2021; van der Sluis 2023). While there is considerable criticism of the Fellowship Scheme (Shaw 2017;

Tomlinson and Watermeyer 2022; van der Sluis 2023), it remains as the primary form of credentialling for higher academic practitioners in the U.K. (Kushnir and Spowart 2021), and its dimensions of teaching practice – activity, core knowledge and professional values – match, and encourage reflection on, many of the priorities of SoTL, such as student-centred learning (Trigwell 2021), constructive alignment (Biggs and Tang 2011), student engagement (Bryson, 2014), assessment as learning (Brown and Race 2021) and Technology to Enhance Learning (Sankey 2021).

Such SoTL priorities will inevitably influence not only professional development offerings available to individuals, but also the perceptions of those individuals regarding the overall purpose of higher education and of their roles within in.

CONTRIBUTION OF THIS RESEARCH

This overview has uncovered a tendency in the literature concerned with the purpose of higher education either to take a theoretical standpoint or to focus on external pressures. On the one hand, dall'Alba and Barnacle (2007) advocate for a move from the epistemological to the ontological purpose of higher education, and Barnett (2004) theorises that higher education must adapt to a world of 'supercomplexity' (p.65) in which we must constantly adapt to changing and competing uncertainties. On the other side of the discussion, Cribb and Gerwitz (2013) in their vision of the 'hollowed-out university' emphasise the range of competing forces, from marketisation to the widening-participation agenda, and Trinidad *et al.* (2021) observe the growing influence of the economic purpose. In all the theorising, there appears to be an absence of empirical research into the subjective viewpoints of those engaged in the everyday business of higher education practice. There is a need, therefore, for studies looking at what practitioners perceive to be the purpose of higher education for any theoretical purpose to assume concrete meaning and discernible impact on students and on society as a whole.

With regard to the professional identities of higher education practitioners, the area appearing to require the most investigation and clarification is that of the alternatively identified *blended Third Space practitioner* (Behari-Leak and Le Roux 2018; Obexer 2022), or *para-academic* (Macfarlane 2011). While the *research versus teaching* (Yang *et al.* 2021) and *academia versus practice* (Dickinson *et al.* 2020) debates warrant further exploration, there is a clear need to explore whether those individuals who

perform or have performed multiple roles view their position as deskilled (Macfarlane 2011) or with the potential to influence transformative change (Behari-Leak and Le Roux 2018).

In addition, there is a need for studies looking at the intersection of higher education practitioners' perceptions of the role and purpose of higher education with perceptions of their own self-identities. As an example of this disconnect between the two interrelated foci of the discussion, Dickinson *et al*. (2020) look at the experiences of 'pracademics' (ibid. p290) in one large post-92 university, moving the focus of the discussion away from research versus teaching, and seemingly taking for granted the commitment of higher education institutions to prepare students for employment and the workforce. The importance of networking, of experience sharing, and imparting necessary employability skills appears to be assumed by both the study's participants and the authors. There is no shortage of literature on the identity *struggles* of higher education practitioners in the face of growing internal and external pressures (Henkel, 2010; Calvert *et al.*, 2012) or attempts to order and categorise (Macfarlane 2011; Boyer 1997). However, connecting these identity negotiation tensions (Yang *et al*. 2021) with perceptions of practitioners 'on the ground' about the purpose of higher education and their own role and place within that world would yield insights into the theoretical frameworks and their validity.

This research, therefore, aims to explore the perceptions of academic staff at a U.K. post-92 university concerning the broad essential role of higher education in a global societal context, and of their own identities and place within that context. The following research questions have been posed to achieve this aim:

1. How do higher education practitioners at a post-92 U.K. university perceive the role of higher education in a broad global societal context?

2. How do higher education practitioners at a post-92 U.K. university perceive their professional identities?

3. How do higher education practitioners at a post-92 U.K. university perceive the relationship between their understanding of higher education's role in a broad societal context and the formation or enactment of their professional identities?

As a unique contribution, this study aims to bring together a comparison of the perceptions of 'career academics' (Dickinson *et al*. 2020 p.292), 'pracademics' (ibid., p.290) and the 'blended professionals' (Obexer 2022, p.468; Behari-Leak and Le Roux 2018) in the 'Third Space' identified by Whitchurch (2008,

p.377). There is certainly scope for comparison and triangulation of these perceptions in forming conclusions about the ways in which practitioners understand the role of higher education in society and in a global context, and the ways in which those understandings form their sense of professional self-identity.

Moreover, this study aims to make a unique contribution in its exploration of the perceptions of higher education practitioners regarding their professional self-identities through the use of Q Methodology for data collection and analysis. Previous studies, in taking a small-scale in-depth interview approach (Yang *et al*. 2021), gathering data from focus groups (Dickinson *et al*. 2020), and autoethnographical research (Obexer 2022) have been unable to study subjective viewpoints in the scientific way possible through Q Methodology (Stephenson 1935; Ramlo 2011). Q Methodology has been described as 'a unique approach allowing for a comprehensive categorization of diverse perspectives' (Espartinez 2024, p.1) through factor analysis.

CONCLUSION

This study will explore the relationship between higher education practitioners' perceptions of the purpose of higher education in a broad global societal context and their perceptions of their own professional identities. It will contribute to the literature in this space by examining the potential for an individual's beliefs about the purpose of higher education to impact the development of professional identity and any existing tensions in that identity. It will take a Q Methodological approach to the inquiry, seeking to study individual subjective viewpoints in a scientific way in order to pinpoint 'shared feelings and common ground' (Stenner 2022, p.12).

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