

Three simple questions to re-define higher education

*The purpose and future of universities, higher education and research has been subject to ceaseless debate, often focused on complex issues of the bureaucratic structure of universities and their relationship to the state. **Matt Rosen** argues that by returning to three basic questions about higher education – What should the end or aim of education be? What should its form or shape be? What is the picture of human life in which a notion of education with this end and form fits? – it might be possible to refocus this debate and open new pathways and opportunities to develop a more meaningful system of higher education.*

This post is part of the Accelerated Academy series, you can find all the posts in the series [here](#).

Much of our discourse about education is dominated, often for reasons of urgency, by a number of very complex questions. How, for instance, are we to manage ever increasing course enrolments? How can an academic institution resolve the tensions between its financial and pedagogical objectives? Such questions can be pivotal; much depends on the answers we provide. But these questions are by no means basic.

The presumption that academic institutions function simply as sites for prospecting and excavating resources from students for the sake of industry – not as places where preparation for a good human life goes on – raises some of the urgent questions we come up against. It also legitimates their urgency. But I believe that there are three more basic questions, frequently superseded by these more complex questions and even left unasked, that are central to any understanding of higher education.

1. What should the end or aim of education be?

2. What should its form or shape be?

3. What is the picture of human life in which a notion of education with this end and form fits?

Now we can't hope to answer one of the questions without broaching the other two. And in order to answer any of them, we require an image of how education suits human ends, fits into human life, and ought to shape our desires and capacities. I don't think the point is to offer definitive answers to these questions. Such an endeavour – to arrive at some global picture by means of which these three questions would be cleared up – would demand too much. We should expect these questions to have heterogenous answers, since the goods of our lives are plural.

What's at stake are the questions themselves, and the status of the academy in which it often seems improper to raise them. It's enough that remembering the weight of these questions and coming to see their inter-relations could allow us to apprehend how many of our institutions, expectations, and models fail to grasp education at its most fundamental. In this sense, getting clear about these questions is already a resistance against the dominant conception of education as mere preparation for work.

What should the end of education be?

When teachers begin the academic year with their students, with what aims should they craft their lessons? What should students want out of their education? What should caregivers expect? Given that we live in a shared world, in which our actions impact and involve others, how should we want an inhabitant of this world to be educated?

Answering this question means first looking towards two other questions. How does education fit into this life, singular and shared, whose ends give it its ends? And what are the ends of this life?

Consider the answer that today's academy might provide. We can imagine a student on the first day of school. The student turns to their parent as they're being dropped off in the morning and says, "I really don't know why I even have to be here. What is school actually for?" They then turn and walk towards the door of the school, and their parent begins to drive away. The parent is taken aback by this question and wonders how to answer it.

I want to suggest that posing this very question is enough to show that today's picture of the academy leaves education unthought at its most basic level, since this question depends on questions that the academy is either unable or unwilling to face: how does education fit into a good human life, and what are the aims of such a life? Understanding that these questions really matter is sufficient to see that an image of education as excavation, as the prospecting of resources to be found locked away in students, doesn't provide an adequate answer for the above student. Those who want to reform or reframe education need only ask the question, "what is education for?" If it seems inconceivable or deeply unattractive to report the answer to a student, then the picture of education at hand faces a real difficulty.



What should the shape of education be?

This surely depends on its ends. But there are often several ways to reach a given end.

First, the form of education should be such that it gives practical expression to its ends. Simone Weil, in her essay on the proper use of school studies, contends that education is for the cultivation of attention. No matter the subject to which one devotes oneself, the skill one fosters is a kind of concentration and perception: seeing things as they are with the fullness of one's awareness. This is education's aim.

Emmanuel Levinas makes a similar case. Education, he thinks, foregrounds our responsibility for each other by placing us in situations in which we encounter genuine differences. Whatever the subject matter to which one attends, with whomever one collaborates, the aim is one and the same thing: the cultivation of hospitality.

For both Weil and Levinas, the aim of education is found not in its content per se but in its shape: the teacher passes on attending or being hospitable by modelling it, by making it central in the form of studying; and students practise it in each subject.

Second, can the end of education be reached? Can we speak of a final stage of education, an afterward? An academy which sets out to prepare students for a life of exploiting and being exploited, even if it conceals this purpose, tends to presume that education is at some point concluded. Then, one enters the workplace.

But consider again Weil and Levinas, for whom education inculcates in us a capacity to see lovingly or to welcome others. Does one ever realise these capacities once and for all? No; one perhaps gets better at attending, one may become more able to be hospitable and with greater ease, but education doesn't stop. I think this is the stronger position to take. But taking it seriously would require some restructuring of the academy.

What is the picture of human life in which education fits?

This is that further question which makes the above student's question to their parent – “what is education for?” – so challenging. Education doesn't stand alone but fits into a broader image of life in a world with other people. And we should be able to say that education's goods are not at odds with but are conducive to the goods of this life.

I'm not going to try to answer this question here in any depth, for the point is just to ask it, to give it its due. Imagine telling a student that their life is for the service of industry, for the contribution to a common good over which one has no say, and in which one is unable to see what one really cares about. The education offered by the prospecting and excavating academy fits into this vision of human life; but it only gets people to accept such a life by teaching them, through education, that things couldn't conceivably be otherwise. This picture of education fits into a human life that doesn't know the fullness of human life. And it is the means by which consent for this life is coerced.

Education fits into human life, and it also has a force over what we take the possibilities and promises of this life to be. This is why it matters so fundamentally, why getting it wrong is so devastating.

Three basic questions

Any reasonable picture of education, however it answers these three questions, has to do justice to them. If it occludes them or attempts to explain them away as trivial when pressed, we have good reason to worry that education has been set aside so that room can be made for conditioning and pacification. Whatever education is for, we should be able to answer without feeling ashamed and perplexed. Whatever shape it takes, it should be clear how this shape endeavours to suit its ends, which we may pursue for a lifetime. Whatever the picture of human life is into which education fits, it shouldn't reduce the depth of human life to a simulacrum of what it might be. Nor should education be put to the use of making this simulacrum appear satisfactory.

Reforming the academy can begin by centralising these questions anew. In asking them aloud and making it clear that they matter, in striving to do them justice however we answer them, we'll take a first step towards a world in which the reality of education can be reconciled with its ideal.

Note: This article gives the views of the authors, and not the position of the LSE Impact Blog, nor of the London School of Economics. Please review our [comments policy](#) if you have any concerns on posting a comment below

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