



It cannot be assumed that education automatically confers learning, qualification and greater wisdom, says **Mats Alvesson**. In fact, if we look at higher education in a broader perspective, the picture is rather depressing

Does education guarantee knowledge?



Part of the quality problem is due to a low level of requirements in many subjects and at many higher-education institutions. For the most part, the only, crucial, form of evaluation is student assessments, which are more an expression of student satisfaction rather than a reflection of the quality of the education provided

It is commonly assumed that education almost automatically leads to a greater ability to think and act in working life and in society as a whole. Education is believed, solely or mainly, to have positive effects for individuals and society. But it cannot be assumed that, simply because people have taken a course or acquired a degree, they have acquired knowledge and developed their analytical capacity, their skills or whatever else is involved.

In their book *Academically Adrift* published in 2011 by University of Chicago Press, Richard Arum and Josipa Roksa followed 2,200 US students over their college years, using tests designed to investigate critical thinking, analytical reasoning, problem solving and writing.

The study indicated that some 45% of students in the sample had made no effective progress in critical thinking, complex reasoning and writing in their first two years and 37% did not improve after four years – the periods covered by the study.

According to Arum and Roksa, “an astounding proportion of students are progressing through higher education today without measurable gains in general skills”. Such skills are what higher education institutions broadly emphasise as their major contribution, making contemporary US higher education appear to be rather unsuccessful.

The students who score the lowest and improve the least are the business students.

Traditional subjects and methods seem to retain their educational value. Nowadays the liberal arts attract a far smaller proportion of students than they did two generations ago. Still, those majoring in the liberal arts fields—humanities and social sciences, natural sciences and mathematics—outperformed those studying business, communications and other new practically oriented majors.

A study of an MBA programme in the UK by Andrew Sturdy and others is also somewhat depressing. An MBA is further education programme at university level for students who have graduated (in whatever subject) and have subsequent work experience. This particular MBA programme stressed – in the usual way – the practical applications of the programme contents.

In a subsequent follow-up five years later, none of the participants could point to having used any aspect of the programme in practice although they thought they had gained something in the form of some general understanding of the area (a helicopter view), improved self-confidence and social contacts.

No doubt they had some benefits that they could not report in concrete terms but nonetheless this study suggests a meagre outcome in terms of practical consequences. This example indicates that education programmes do not necessarily result in a tangible improvement in the acquisition of knowledge.

One could, of course, also emphasise that higher education means a broader outlook, a reflective orientation and an improved capacity to participate in society.

Part of the quality problem is due to a low level of requirements in many subjects and at many higher-education institutions. For the most part, the only, crucial, form of evaluation is student assessments, which are more an expression of student satisfaction rather than a reflection of the quality of the education provided. The incentive for teachers may be to use less-demanding course content or not be strict or demanding in assessments of student performances.

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If the students are paying substantial fees there is an additional pressure to ensure that “the customers” are satisfied and to avoid reducing the market by failing students with weak results. Institutions, programmes and courses that have low standards achieve a high student completion rate and are rewarded accordingly. Courses that have a reputation for being demanding may also be less appealing to students and lead to fewer applicants.

It might be supposed that many institutions want to maintain high standards in order to improve their reputation with employers and ambitious students. But “student satisfaction” is not the same as high standards in terms of qualification output. A study of students’ ratings of lecturers show that people on courses assessed to be easy rather than difficult gave higher scores to their lecturers.

Another problem is student motivation. Many commentators stress the low level of motivation and the limited study input of many students. According to Arum and Roksa again, the majority of students come to university with no particular interest in their programmes and no sense of how these might prepare them for future careers. In MBAs and similar degrees the motive seems often to improve a CV and get a better-paid job.

Many students spend modest time studying. In the US, the average time spent on what was supposed to be full-time higher education was reported to be as low as 12 to 13 hours per week. (This is in addition to spending, on average, 15 hours per week in class.) In 1961, the average was 25 hours per week.

Even at the elite University of California, students report that, on average, they spend “12 hours [a week] socialising with friends, 11 hours using computers for fun, six hours watching television, six hours exercising, five hours on hobbies” — and 13 hours a week studying.

In Sweden the numbers are similar. Only 32% of of students devoted more than 30 hours a week to their studies (time in class and self-study combined). Other studies give a similar picture. Study time averages closer to half-time than full-time. A colleague in Canada, with considerable

ambitions as a teacher and with personal charisma that should have an impact on student enthusiasm, says that she has almost given up trying to create a commitment to her subject (business studies). The classroom was permeated by silence and indifference until she reluctantly introduced grading based on classroom participation. Then the hands went up everywhere.

When she asked her students why they had chosen this subject, she received two responses: either “to earn as much money as possible” or “don’t know”. These two answers are not restricted to business students but seem to illustrate two major problems for contemporary students more broadly.

One is an instrumental and opportunistic attitude to higher education among many while the other is that many students are, as Arum and Roksa write, “drifting through college without a clear sense of purpose”.

Limited requirements and a low degree of motivation are to some extent linked to a market and consumer orientation in the higher-education field, reflecting on one hand a greater consumption focus and on the other a greater public provision of services.



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Higher education has become increasingly market oriented. The idea that students are to be regarded as a customer, even in supposedly strictly non-commercial contexts, is becoming increasingly common. This has resulted in a high level of expectations and at the same time has probably contributed to the erosion of work and study morality. (There are other pieces to this puzzle as well, including shortages of funding, students working part-time, research-focused academics viewing teaching as something to minimise, large and anonymous factory-like institutions, and expensive accreditation leading to managerialism, standardisation and much “box ticking”.)

In a consumer culture, market fundamentalists sometimes believe that consumer satisfaction drives quality but this may lead to a less-demanding workload, fairly easy course content, entertainment in class and generous grading plus the allocation of resources by universities to non-educational arrangements (sports, counselling, career advice and so on).

Even though Arum and Roksa’s study indicated that slightly more than half of students showed improvement during their time in college, it cannot be assumed that education automatically confers learning, qualification and greater wisdom. If we look at higher education in a broader perspective, the picture is rather depressing.

The Swedish National Agency for Higher Education’s *Student Mirror* suggests that “increased specialization, fragmentation and a utility focus seems to be the dominant characteristic of higher education today, and a self-interested professional and career approach seems to characterize many students’ attitudes”.

The broader purpose of education, which should lead to well-informed, reflective and critically thinking citizens, is thereby not really accomplished.

What a university often offers, then, is perhaps not guaranteed improved intellectual skills or knowledge but rather credentials: a diploma that signals employability and basic work discipline but that often has uncertain information value.



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American universities attract criticism for their strong focus on “entertainment” and keeping students happy, often offering unusual courses and employing low-cost part-time teachers and postgraduate students for a large part of their teaching, thus ensuring that the professors’ teaching time is reduced so that they can produce research articles that make it possible to maintain or improve ranking positions.

One line of criticism focuses on the university assumption that students are “customers” and that thus increasing expenditure should be devoted to marketing and producing a good customer experience for students. As a result there is an emphasis on facilities and generally having a nice time rather than a focus on studies and learning. Most of this criticism is also current in other countries with a large higher-education sector. At many places more resources go into “student service” and administration than teaching.

All this means that we may be justified in regarding significant parts of contemporary higher-education systems as gigantic illusionary arrangements. We live in a knowledge society, elite groups like to claim (thereby boosting their own status and self-esteem). The expanded

40%

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higher-education sector can be seen as an arrangement of doubtful substance but high on symbolic and signal value. It is a legitimising structure that gives some credibility to the knowledge society's claims and protects such claims from careful scrutiny.

It is, of course, important not to exaggerate in this context. It would be ridiculous not to acknowledge the significance and value of much of the research and education that is leading to knowledge development and increased qualifications. This is still a key characteristic of much university activity. But to the extent we can rely on Arum and Rokhsna's study in 2011 then about 40% of US students do not really learn much, which might indicate that the illusion element is of around this order.

The illusion is most likely much more significant in management and business studies, where instrumentalism and commercialism take their toll. My point here is not to claim that it is fully possible to clearly separate illusion and substance but to argue that higher education's claim to be a competence-raising institution can, like many other things, be understood as partly illusory. This view offers a counterpoint to predominant claims about a knowledge society and the necessity and value of expanding higher education.

Can anything be done about this?

Yes, one possibility would be to make systematic assessment of the learning and intellectual qualifications in higher-education programmes. This could be organised by national higher-education authorities on an international basis (such as Pisa studies for basic education) by accreditation bodies (that would do less harm and more good if they stopped asking for formal structures and procedures and looked at substance and outcomes instead) or, internally, by universities and other higher-education institutions.

Give all students – or a random sample of them – a generic test on intellectual ability when they start and then a similar one when they finish. Improvement scores are then highlighted and an antidote to all "keep the customers happy" pseudo-teaching could be put in place.

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Through the use of such “substantive” indicators of what is actually accomplished in higher education – if anything – the current race to the bottom in terms of the key purpose of higher education could perhaps be prevented.

At present most forces drive education downwards in terms of learning and qualification and any visibility or other reward for doing the opposite tend to be weak and it becomes increasingly difficult for institutions and lecturers to maintain integrity.

The latter is, at present, a liability. But we can work to change this.

This article is partly based on Chapter 5 of Mats Alvesson's book The Triumph of Emptiness (Oxford University Press).

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Mats Alvesson is a professor at Lund University, Sweden, and also at the University of Queensland in Australia and Cass Business School in London, UK. He has published extensively on knowledge-intensive organisations, leadership, identity issues, organisational cultures and is at present investigating “functional stupidity” in organisations.