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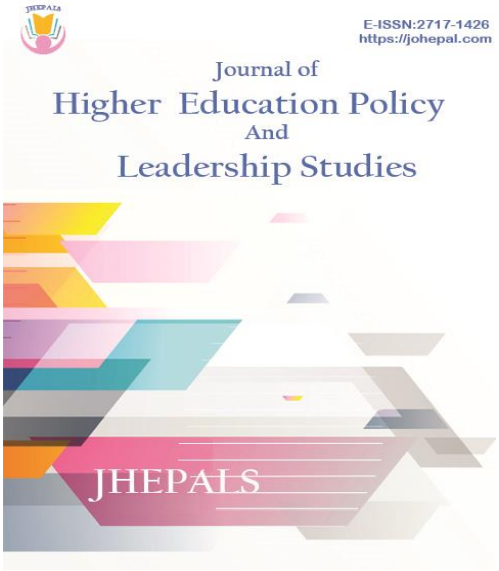

A Clash of Intentions in Higher Education

Hanne Leth Andersen

Rector
Roskilde University, DENMARK

Email: ha@ruc.dk
https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6537-0112

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Hanne Leth Andersen *

Abstract

Modern higher education has an obligation to form graduates who can work in new fields, deal with complex problems and contribute with new angles to societal challenges. Consequently, programs should be planned so that students learn to apply disciplinary knowledge to real problems in their surroundings and develop complex cognitive, interpersonal, and intrapersonal skills. For this, quality assurance and clear goal orientation can be helpful tools. Nevertheless, the development of these tools seems to bring education into a direction of predictability where students – and their teachers – lose motivation. The perceived reasons are: detachment from research, heavy administrative tasks, and less room for curiosity and creativity. In relation to this, I wish to discuss how universities, with specific reference to university management systems, can fulfil their mission to educate independent critical thinkers and play an important role in solving the basic problems of society. I will analyse some of the challenges we need to address, mainly in the planning and management of education, including the pedagogical approaches and the relation to the research base and research methods. In order to understand the current tendencies in education today, the challenges of the growing performance culture will be included in the overall picture.

Keywords: Education for the Future; Performance Culture; Quality Assurance; Goal Orientation; Critical Thinking

* **Corresponding author's email:** ha@ruc.dk

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The Purpose of Education – In the Light of Pressing Challenges

If education should contribute to solving the pressing challenges of society in the future, graduates must be strong independent thinkers capable of solving new problems by collaborating across disciplines. Education for sustainable development and change demands an amount of curiosity and creativity, together with personal motivation and social and emotional competences, in order to empower learners. Such education develops "the knowledge, skills, values and attitudes that enable learners to make informed decisions and actions on global problems […]" (Giannini, 2020). Also companies are looking for people with initiative, creativity and the ability to ask new questions. In an era of rapid technological change, there is a strong need to train young people who can deal with complexity, be creative and intuitive, and have an ethical compass and an ability to understand and see the strength in other people.

However, along with the overall effort in education to deal with complex challenges, there has been a strong political commitment to quality, accountability and control, which is related to the pedagogical development of declarative approaches and explicit goal orientation. This has clearly limited the freedom of students and their teachers, as it has insisted on predictability rather than curiosity. At the same time, performance goals have become more dominant, which promotes a learning culture where mistakes are not welcome and where the assessment and the grade become the objective rather than the learning itself (Biesta, 2009; Midgley et al., 2001). In this way, with a detailed goal-oriented management aiming for short-term relevance at the job market, the research approach and research basis of university education may be weakened (Andersen, 2021). Based on this analysis, it is important to search for pedagogical and didactical tools that may support the creation of a more open space for professional and personal development – and to understand how this can be promoted at university policy and leadership.

Predefined Goals and Performance Rating Leads to Superficial Learning

In Europe, the Bologna Process, launched in 1999, aimed first of all for mobility and mutual recognition of education in the participating countries. To obtain this, the detailed description of intended learning outcomes (ILOs) and of the exact workload (ECTS) to achieve the objectives seemed to be appropriate instruments, along the lines of the Common European Qualifications Framework (2005). At least in some countries, the implementation of the Bologna process, together with a growing focus on systematic quality assurance with accreditation of programs and institutions, has contributed strongly to the understanding of education as an area for regulation and production of predefined knowledge, skills and competences. The idea of precise production of learning outcomes is related to the idea of "alignment" between objectives, work forms and exam forms (Biggs 2003), which in itself makes sense, but if it becomes the overall principle of education, carries a risk of reducing the learning to a superficial activity (Andersen, 2010). In the Danish context, it is a requirement that curricula in higher education must include descriptions of objectives and alignment between "learning outcomes" and exam forms, and that teaching must clearly prepare students for forms of examination designed to test the objectives for which teaching has been provided (the Danish Accreditation Regulation). This was also

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pushed by a strong focus on education to be of direct benefit to business (Andersen & Jacobsen, 2017).

In such an approach to education, the activities of a programme must ensure that the students can achieve the described objectives (intended learning outcome, ILO). External quality experts should be able to see and measure the outcomes as effectively as possible. And if a specific learning pathway leading to the set objectives is envisaged, this may seem effective, but it may also deprive teachers and students of their freedom to choose their methods. For students, if the overall goal orientation becomes too detailed, the effect may be that they learn to decode the goals and train themselves to declare goal achievement by learning what is expected and prepared, and of communicating it clearly in examinations – to get the best grades. For teachers, this control can be experienced as too instrumental, as a form of deprofessionalisation. However, for the inexperienced or professionally weaker teachers, it can serve as a support (Dolin, 2016, p. 84).

Clearly, you may find good support in goals, especially if there is room to formulate your own goals within an overall framework, so that ownership and relatedness are not lost. A degree of goal orientation can help frame activities and support the professional community in articulating their shared intentions for the overall programme and their understanding of its component parts and these interactions. In this way, it can create a coherence and a framework for collaboration. But goals may control the teacher's interaction with the students in the actual teaching, and the students' questions and experience can then not play the role is should: education is the students' process, and the strongest results are driven by their motivation and drive. Students must be recognised as serious participants in the educational dialogue (Nielsen, 2017, p. 56), and this includes the discussion of goals and objectives.

Therefore, even though the intentions are good, the explicit and often detailed goal orientation in educational programs carries a risk of losing the most essential element of education, namely the students' enthusiasm and motivation to engage and absorb themselves in their studies (Andersen & Tofteskov, 2016).

If education and training virtually programmes young people in reference to a list of elaborate learning outcomes that they can be guaranteed to be tested on in exams; if the assessment is based on a grading system that focuses strictly on achievement and failure; and if grades are perceived from an early stage in the education system as determining the future and opportunities of students (high stakes); then there is little space or stimulus for inquiry, critique or creativity along the way, and there is a serious risk of educating for strategic competence, rather than for insight or thinking beyond the boundaries of what is targeted. This is also referred to as 'surface-critical thinking': the student assesses different points of view clinically, without personal involvement, using criteria that he or she judges will best suit the person assessing the performance (Ford, 1986). By this, you get a narrow focus on external motivation, and you lose much of the internal motivation in terms of interest, pleasure and satisfaction (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Harackiewicz et al. (2002) have shown that performance-oriented goals lead to achievement and that past performance is a predictor of academic achievement, but not of interest. In contrast, more holistic and mastery-oriented goals are predictors of continued interest.

Additionally, time pressure can support the tendency towards declarative and superficial approaches to professional knowledge and skills. If teachers and students

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experience time pressure in the program they are in, together with a pronounced focus on exams, the objectives of teaching can be transferred directly into the language of the students: they are trained to distinguish the taxonomic levels of their tasks and to use the correct codes, without having been through the process of acquisition, as shown e.g. in Blooms taxonomies (cited from Bloom et al., 1956). There does not seem to be time for the exercises, the analyses, the calculations, the time to discuss the arguments, relate to different points of view, to ask the curious questions and search for their possible answers.

Education and teaching with a focus on learning objectives easily leads to a systems-oriented and behaviourist understanding of students' intentionality and behaviour, where it is more or less assumed that everyone learns in the same way – or at least have to meet the same objectives. Metaphors such as programming and imprinting seem appropriate for describing the developmental view. Setting detailed goals and sub-goals for people's development and learning restricts the space for their own intentionality and will, and can lead to boredom and lack of motivation (Nielsen, 2017). One can end up creating a closed, finite set of demands, which ultimately undermines both authenticity and autonomy (Andersen & Tofteskov, 2016).

The trend is paradoxical. The strong discourse in education policy that celebrates independence, originality, collaboration and agency is not met by the policy implemented: the system is designed to produce performance orientation and external motivation that ultimately undermine the requested competences. You do not get the behaviour you reward: You get the behaviour that optimises the chance of reward.

The Need for a Research Basis for the Development of Education

Whereas until the 1980s the academic profile of many university studies depended almost exclusively on the profile of individual researchers and academic environments, they are nowadays organised more on the basis of input from students, graduate studies, competence needs in society and business, etc. This development has opened up greater dynamism in relation to the pedagogical organisation of programmes, but it is an important task in university management to seek to establish a balance between the more or less self-regulating structures of the past, and the often too invasive external influence and control. Didactisation, profession awareness and stakeholder orientation are positive measures in education, but they may go too far and reduce research-based education beyond recognition for the benefit of a predictable production of workplace competences and short-sighted relevance (Andersen & Jacobsen, 2017).

The relevance of an education is more than the first job, and more than the immediate demands of the professional world. The purpose is just as much to prepare for the fourth or fifth job and perhaps even to invent a totally new job that does not exist yet. Education is about developing personal, social and professional competences to deal with unknown, complex problems and contribute with new angles to well-known challenges. In order to ensure that education is not only relevant from a short term perspective and to avoid that research and education lose their connection with each other, it is necessary to loosen the grip that a too specific goal orientation combined with a detailed quality system management has on university education. For this, research based education must be redefined.

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Clash of Intentions

Research based education is not only about researchers teaching, neither is it only about transferring new research results. Evidently, the percentage of researchers in the teaching staff and the allocated time to do research are important key figures, but the nexus of research and education is equally about the interaction between people who are passionate about exploring the domain that their discipline is concerned with, in depth and to the furthest limits, through the use of scientific methods. If the research base of an education is subordinated to a very specific goal orientation as part of a systematic quality system, the strings on the free teaching are severely tightened: in some quality systems it must be ensured that the researchers teaching in the programme publish research in the field that the programme has defined in its content elements and academic goals – and even in the field of each course in the programme.* Conversely, total freedom of teaching is not a condition on which universities can build strong programmes in which students and society can have confidence, because at worst the content and form of the programmes risk becoming haphazard and not exemplary of the actual purpose of the programme. It is therefore important to establish a balance between the overall purpose and defining lines of a programme and an exploratory approach in which the faculty members participate in setting the agenda in an engaging way with the students. The responsibility for this lies within the leadership of the programme, together with deans, rectors and governing bodies at the national or local level. And the capability to develop strong programs within such a framework depends on a combination of research strengths and pedagogical expertise, both in the leadership and at the teacher level.

An additional element that can provide strong quality conditions for education is for students to participate in concrete research projects. Indeed, students need to learn to argue critically, insightfully and creatively that some solutions are better than others. Participating in research projects brings a very direct connection to the necessary methods and procedures.

Planning Education for Independent Learning: The Choice of Approach

Within the paradigm of research based education, it is essential that students are involved in the forms of work and can construct their academic knowledge while at the same time building a personal relation to it (Scardamalia & Bereiter, 2006), in order to solve complex tasks in the future. And we know that the so-called 21st century skills or four C's (critical thinking, collaboration, creative thinking, and communication) and among the most important skills possessed by effective problem-solving teams (Spoon et al., 2021).

Also the pedagogical organization and approach to education should be grounded as dialogical, situational and interactive, ultimately in order to allow both teacher and students to be critical and creative and follow up on issues related to teaching and scholarship. It is essential that the actors in the teaching situation are engaged in the process and listen to the emerging understandings and possibilities of the situation. The teacher should involve or directly address the student and create space for reflection, in an appreciative way, in order to enable new knowledge and insights to emerge.

* This rather narrow understanding of research based education that has been applied in the Danish quality assurance system.

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This dialogical interaction and approach is not only dependent on the form of teaching, but also - and probably even more so - on the intention behind. A lecturer with 200 students may be attentive and use exemplary dialogue with open questions and short group sessions during the course, whereas a supervisor or a tutor with four students may ask closed questions and apply an instructional approach rather than inquiring. Likewise, some types of questions tend to create a situation where the students must guess what the teacher is thinking of. Evidently, this is not stimulating for independent thinking. Other types of questions may be a matter of the teacher and student arriving at new insights together, as in an exploratory, inquiry-based approach, respectful of the student's starting point. The classical university tradition of discussion and refutation, with its strong analytical-critical character, can have a pedagogical inhibitory effect because it takes less account of the individual participant and in some cases even appears disrespectful and patronising (Andersen, 2011). Rather, in order to stimulate dialogical, situational and interactive teaching and learning, the students should be considered as active and co-responsible participants in their own educational process.

The professionalism to be acquired through education contains critical, theoretical and moral objectives (Kreber, 2013; Andersen & Jacobsen, 2017). The path to professional excellence goes via deep learning and partial understandings of concrete situations and practices - in short, experiences that are built through practice and individual reflection. Therefore, all educational programs must manage to involve the individual in his or her own professional relationship and his or her relationship with society and the world. This requires taking students seriously as independent thinkers and actors in their own education (Andersen & Jacobsen, 2017), with their respective backgrounds and experiences. It may well be done starting from a specific problem or situation, as in project work or case-based teaching, where the teacher is a facilitator who accompanies the student in the discovery of new perspectives and has not settled on answers or conclusions, and where the students must seek the information they need. Also, projects and their corresponding exams may well take place in real life, in partnerships and in solving real problems. With such approaches, students can develop professional and personal judgement and the ability to react appropriately in new and unknown situations.

Planning for the Unplanned

Even when working with very specific learning outcomes, it is of course still possible that students experience learning that is beside, above, or just beyond the goal descriptions (Andersen & Bager, 2012, p. 130). But this is not what is systematically promoted. It may happen because the students' inner motivation and curiosity are given more weight than the performance orientation that otherwise prevails, or it may happen because the teacher creates space to ask questions, formulate hypotheses and experiment.

These ideals of learning processes at university are calling for more open teaching with room for questions, with less steering and control and less teacher-centred learning, with more listening and facilitation. It argues for teaching that allows for hypotheses and misconceptions, and where students are engaged in equal dialogues to explore new angles and questions. In this way, they should be able to create exemplary and motivating problem formulations. In this space, research and education can be closer. In this space, the answer

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is not given in advance, and exam preparation is not about learning to take good notes or memorising the teacher's presentation.

The existing ideal of quality has little ability to innovate in itself and cannot be relied upon when it comes to the transformative power of education (Andersen & Jacobsen, 2017). And education is and should be more than documentable learning activities. If interaction, critique, creativity and shared responsibility are to be promoted, obvious typological forms of work are problem-oriented project work, case-based teaching, but also team teaching and lecturing can take on the colour of a more emergence-oriented approach, if space can be created for it and if time pressure and excessive goal orientation do not get the upper hand.

Accordingly, there is a need to introduce more open exam forms and open questions, involving students as much as possible, including in the establishment of assessment criteria and in the assessment. This is an essential shift from external goal orientation and common goal setting. Being involved in debating and setting assessment criteria builds understanding and motivation, but is usually precisely the boundary set for student involvement. However, there is a development in this field in these years, which also includes participation in assessment (Andersen & Tofteskov, 2016, chapter 14). Being able to assess one's own and others' performance conveys ownership and independent judgement.

Openness in relation to teaching and examinations is about less closed goal formulations, with room for reflection and thinking beyond the limits of the described goal. In this way, a dynamic combination of goal orientation is achieved that can set a framework and a direction to navigate, with the integration of creative, innovative or unusual task solutions and achievements.

Fundamentally, the task is to give education back to the students, with literature searches, basic methodological training and the integration of new areas of knowledge, rather than providing assurance that they are moving through a planned and perfect learning pathway with monitoring and progression control. Young people seek meaning and development and will not be satisfied with superficial learning unless they are intimidated by performance targets defined as crucial to their future. It is therefore important to develop more engaging and student-driven ways of working, with more open objectives and appreciative, comprehensive assessment.

This places great demands on teaching in lecture halls and group rooms. It requires teachers to be a little more open-minded, ready to engage in open co-creation with students, leaving the well-prepared exercises without forgetting the overall learning objectives and the purpose of the program. This requires a high level of academic and scientific mastery and the courage to cede control. It requires pedagogical oversight, which is obviously linked to pedagogical training – an area that can still be developed and which to some extend is discouraged by the strong focus on research production in university careers.

There is a need to link research more closely to teaching and to foster collaboration between researchers and students, but this requires new experiments as it breaks with the division into research and teaching activities that characterises most universities today. In turn, this can strengthen the research base and unlock stimulating learning opportunities linked to an inquiring and problem-oriented approach, for both teachers and students.

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Conclusive Remarks

We have seen that when goal orientation prevails, the conditions for in-depth learning and thus for the development of independent judgement, critical thinking, decision-making and personal and professional development are weakened. In this way, when the system for ensuring the achievement of objectives takes over, it is often at the expense of both students' and teachers' intrinsic motivation. Also, the combination of external goal orientation (steering by goals), systematic quality assurance and performance orientation that this article has addressed has the potential to de-professionalise educators and to turn students into superficial learners or even customers with a demand for a specific product or a benefit ordered from the catalogue in which they chose their education.

With this in mind, I have explored how it may nevertheless be possible to create conditions for involving students and for strengthening the research base in education, showing that this requires open, exploratory and problem-oriented forms of work, as well as a combination of planning and dialogue. Setting goals is a natural part of any education, but goals must not prevail and deprive participants of their right of initiative. Accordingly, we must manage to combine responsible educational planning with freedom of action for teachers and students. The key is that there is room for new questions, hypotheses and experiments. In this way, personal and professional growth can be part of education.

University leaders should implement and ensure permanent, broad partnerships between actors from different sectors of society, such as companies, organizations and municipalities, which students can make use of on an ongoing basis, e.g. in their project work or through internships. In this way, they can participate in the testing of research results in real life, and work to support that these are effectively implemented where they are needed. All this definitely demands a research base capable of delivering basic understanding of transdisciplinary and disciplinary fields, and also a pedagogical approach where students are at the centre of their own education and develop autonomy and judgmental skills, and maintain curiosity and initiative.

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Human Participants

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Prof. Hanne Leth Andersen is Rector at Roskilde University, Denmark. Before she came to Roskilde, she has served at the Faculty of Arts at Aarhus University as associate dean and professor of university pedagogy and at Copenhagen Business School (CBS) as professor and director of the CBS Learning Lab. Hanne Leth Andersen chairs the educational committee of the Danish Rectors' Conference, and she is a member of executive boards, international councils and committees such as the International Advisory Board for the Research Council of Norway and the expert evaluation panel for The Academy of Finland for Competitive funding to strengthen universities' research profiles. She has served as President of the international expert committee for the French Government's investment program on University Program Development, Nouveaux Cursus à l'Université. She has international experience as an expert in Quality Assurance and Quality Development, as an expert for the Norwegian Quality Assurance Agency, NOKUT, and for the European University Association, EUA, and as member of the Danish Accreditation Council. Hanne Leth Andersen is the author of more than 120 scientific articles in Danish and international journals and several monographs. She holds a PhD in French Language and an MA in Romance Philology, both from University of Copenhagen. In 2021, she received the Legion of Honour (l'Ordre de la Légion d'Honneur), the highest civilian honour in France and in 2015 the title of Commander of the Order of Academic Palms (l'Ordre des Palmes Académiques) the highest honour awarded to academics in France. She is also Knight of the Danish Dannebrog Order. In 2005, Aarhus University Awarded her its Price for Excellent and Innovative Teaching.

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