The Link Between Educational Theories and Purpose in Life in the Context of Higher Education

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to explore the perceptions of students and faculty members regarding the role of higher education. The study was performed by way of survey, collecting responses from 202 participants, 167 of which indicated to be a student and 35 to be an educator. The survey tested attitudes and beliefs towards various educational theories, including Credentialism, Pragmatism, Social Reproduction Theory, Bildung, Humanistic Theory, and Critical Pedagogy, on their correlation to participants' perceived strength of purpose in life. A positive correlation between Credentialist Attitudes and perceived strength of purpose in life was found for students, suggesting that seeing education as a means to reach a certain career path, can enhance motivation and life goals. In addition, a small negative correlation was found between Social Reproduction Attitudes and perceived strength of purpose in life, highlighting the importance of classroom inclusivity between students and educators. The study concludes with the recommendation that universities should strive to make students feel that their efforts are the reason for their success.

Keywords: higher education, purpose in life, purpose, students, educators

The Link Between Educational Theories and Purpose in Life in the Context of Higher Education

In the Netherlands there is an advertisement campaign for a university, which includes the slogan: "Nederland wordt steeds slimmer" ("The Netherlands keeps getting smarter"). In fact, according to an article in the DUB, the percentage of people in the Netherlands who studied on a level of higher education was around 25% in 1990 (de Bruin, 2014). By the year 2014, this percentage had risen to 45%. Another report by the OECD, released in 2020, shows that in 2019 almost 50% of people in the Netherlands within the age group of 25 to 34 had attained a Bachelor's degree (OECD, 2020). A more recent report by the Centraal Bureau van de Statistiek (2023), stated that there were 801.460 people currently studying at a level of higher education in the Netherlands in 2023. With such a large number of students studying in universities, it is important to question what the purpose of higher education is.

In the Netherlands higher education can be defined as Hoger Beroepsonderwijs (HBO; Higher Vocational Education) and Wetenschappelijk Onderwijs (WO; Scientific Education). The official website of the Dutch government defines HBO as an institution that provides theoretical and practical training for occupations for which a higher vocational qualification is either required or useful (Government of the Netherlands, n.d.). WO is defined as an institution that pursues academic research and teaching. Therefore, the main difference between HBO and WO should be stated as practical training (HBO) versus the pursuit of academic knowledge (WO). This paper will focus on the WO side of higher education, and the terms Universities and higher education institutions will be used interchangeably. In this paper, the purpose of higher education is defined as the primary goals, aims and reasons as to why higher education exists.

Watty (2006) studied Australian and New Zealand accountancy students on their beliefs of the purpose of higher education. It was found that 89% of students believed that for

their university, the primary aim was to prepare them for working life. Furthermore, they found that 99% of this same group of students believed that the purpose of higher education should be developing critical reasoning and the formation of intellectual abilities and perspectives, as well as promoting lifelong learning. However, only about 59% of students indicated that these aims were demonstrated by their universities. Brooks and colleagues (2020) looked at six different European countries and found that students gave little thought to what the purpose of higher education was. According to the same study, the most common purpose of higher education, as perceived by students, is to prepare them for the labour market. However, it is important to note that while some students believe higher education institutions are currently fulfilling this role, others think these institutions should be doing more to prepare students for employment. (Brooks et al., 2020).

Contrasting results were found by Lopez and Fontela (2024), in their study on the educator's primary role. According to this paper, one-third of the surveyed faculty members considered the primary role of educators to be cultivating critical thinking skills in students. In contrast, a third of the students believed that educators should prioritize fostering student development and personal growth. In fact, Lopez and Fontela found that among students, the development of critical thinking skills was the least chosen option (2024).

Interestingly, Boyer (1991) argued that we need a more concise definition of what it means to be a student. As Chan (2016) points out in his literature review study, there are contrasting beliefs between educators and students about the outcomes of studying. These studies show that there is no consensus between what higher education *is* and what it *should be*. This is problematic, as Carnochan (1994) points out: "Lacking adequate criteria of purpose, we do not know how well our higher education works in practice or even exactly what working well would mean" (p. 126). This poses the question of how these criteria of purpose for higher education should be defined.

When looking at the results found by both Watty (2006) and Brooks and colleagues (2020), who stated that the largest group of their respective samples believed that the purpose of higher education is to prepare for working life. This highlights the importance of obtaining credentials as a key aspect of higher education. Credentialism, with regards to higher education, posits that degrees given out by universities are supposed to be the primary way to determine if someone is qualified to do a certain job or task (Encyclopedia.com, 2024). In line with the research by Watty and Brooks et al., Guan and Blair (2022) examined the perceptions of Chinese students on Credentialism. Their research found that students perceived a degree from a higher educational institution as a legitimizing way to determine if someone can work in a profession. Additionally, they found that students believe that Credentialism is currently negatively impacting the integrity of higher education. This is due to the large number of students enrolling in courses, which brings credentials to the foreground, since it is a requirement to achieve a certain goal, as opposed to the actual learning process.

Contrary to the theory of Credentialism, Pragmatism focuses on the practical application of thought (Taatila, 2010, p. 54), or in other words, learning begins by figuring out why one should learn, and what this learning will be used for (Ardalan, 2008). Sogunro (2014) found that Pragmatism can be a potential motivating factor for students that lack motivation. Over 90% of the students that were interviewed in this study indicated that they needed the real-life application of what they learned.

A theory mentioned by Broadfoot (1978), called the Social Reproduction Theory, posits that higher education should ensure that the elite stay dominant, whilst the poor stay dominated. Thus, higher education's purpose according to Social Reproduction Theory is mostly focused on the reproduction of social classes on a generational dimension. According to Bourdieu and Passeron (1977), the educational institutions should have the right to

determine what it means to achieve something within the context of education. This theory focuses more on the role of higher educational institutions than the theories mentioned prior.

Opposing Social Reproduction Theory is a theory called Critical Pedagogy. Critical Pedagogy is identified by its link between education and societal problems (Köseoğlu et al., 2023). One of the more important aspects of Critical Pedagogy is that higher educational institutions should be a place where everyone can voice their opinions without being judged (Brookfield, 2017). This also means that students should be taught how to think critically, to help them question the current system, and question whether there are inequalities or not (Smith & Seal, 2021).

A theory that focuses more on the student as an individual, is called Bildung. Siljander and Sutinen (2012), explain Bildung as "a creative process in which a person, through their own actions, develops themselves and their cultural environment" (p. 3). Andersen (2021) mentioned a more concise definition of Bildung within the context of higher education, stating that Bildung involves acquiring the education and knowledge essential for thriving in society, as well as developing the moral and emotional maturity to work effectively with others in a self-reliant way. Interesting findings were found by Yang (2021), who proposed that Bildung can be used in addition to a complementary external environment, to create the best environment for a student's personal development.

A theory closely linked to Bildung is called Humanistic Theory, where the focus of learning is even more linked to personal growth (Tangney, 2014). Within this context it is important that the main reason a student studies is due to intrinsic motivation and not extrinsic rewards (such as a credential). The teacher should therefore play a facilitating role and foster an environment that involves students into the learning process (Rowan, 2005).

As cited by George and Park (2016), purpose in life refers to the level to which someone feels their life is directed and motivated by certain goals (Battista & Almond, 1973;

Klinger, 1998; McKnight & Kashdan, 2009). In other words, students who score high on purpose know what they want to achieve and work towards achieving those goals, whilst students who score low on purpose feel more aimless in life (George & Park, 2016). It would therefore be interesting to see if a strong sense of belief or attitude towards a certain theory of education correlates with someone's perceived strength of purpose in life.

According to Seal and colleagues (2021), a lot of lecturers feel underprepared for their lectures. By finding out which theories of higher education are most important for students' perceived strength of purpose in life, we can make sure that educators have more certainty in their preparation of lectures. Since both students and educators are important stakeholders within higher education, it is important to see for both these groups if there are links between perceived strength of purpose in life and beliefs and attitudes towards certain theories of higher education. However, research has been lacking in answering how these beliefs and attitudes on the previously mentioned theories of education influence one's perceived strength of purpose in life. By seeing if there is a correlation between these variables, this paper will contribute to ongoing research on the topic of higher education. Therefore, in this paper, the following research question will be tested: Is somebody's perceived strength of purpose in life linked to their perceived view on their beliefs and attitudes on certain philosophies of higher education?

By answering this question, we will see if someone's perception of a certain theory of education is related to perceived strength of purpose in life, and if such a relation is found, we could give ground to new research. In the remainder of this paper, this question will be explored. To do so, several correlational analyses on information gathered through a survey performed on students and faculty members of the University of Groningen will be performed.

Methods

Participants

In total there were 338 respondents to our online survey. Out of all the respondents, 136 respondents (40.2%) were excluded, either because they did not consent or because they did not finish the survey, leaving us with a final sample of 202 participants. One person was excluded because their answers and response time showed reason for suspicion. For a full overview of the demographics see Appendices A1 to A3. 167 participants indicated that their primary role in higher education could be defined as being a student (82.7%), whilst 35 indicated it to be an educator (17.3%) (see Appendix A4). An overview of the year a student indicated to be in can be found in Appendix A5. Participants were sourced from a sample of students and educators at the University of Groningen.

To be included in the study, participants had to be either a student or faculty member. Respondents were sourced through posters, social media and by texting in various WhatsApp group chats related to university. Participants were self-selected. First year students received credits for their participation, whilst five other participants had a chance to receive monetary compensation.

Materials

Higher Education Purpose Scale (HEPS)

For this study we created our own questionnaire, including 38 statements based on the main stakeholders within university education and several theories of higher education (e.g., Credentialism, Pragmatism, Social Reproduction Theory, Bildung, Humanistic Theory and Critical Pedagogy). Questions were asked on a five-point Likert scale, with answers ranging from -- (strongly disagree) to ++ (strongly agree). An example item is: "University students should be/are taught to discover their interests". Questions were formatted in such a way that participants could answer both the question of should be and is easily, as we put these side by side. Participants were asked nine general statements as to why they decided to study. These

also were scaled on a five-point Likert scale, with answers ranging from "--" (strongly disagree) to "++" (strongly agree). An example item is: "I study to obtain a degree".

Multidimensional Existential Meaning Scale (MEMS)

Additionally, we asked three questions from the Multidimensional Existential Meaning Scale (MEMS; George & Park, n.d.), which is a 15-item instrument inquiring about the three aspects of life meaning (comprehension, purpose, mattering). This scale has a seven-point response scale ranging from "Strongly disagree" to "Strongly agree". An example item is: "I have certain life goals that compel me to keep going". We changed the format of the response scale range, from seven points to five, to stay more in line with the format used in our survey. We also shortened the subscale from 29 items to three. An overview of these three items can be found in Appendix B.

General Self-Efficacy Scale (GSE)

The General Self-Efficacy Scale (GSE) by Schwarzer and Jerusalem (1995) was also added. This is a 10-item instrument inquiring about self-reported self-efficacy. It has a four-point response scale ranging from "Not at all true" to "Exactly true". An example item is: "I always manage to solve difficult problems if I try hard enough".

Finally, an open question was asked to participants, asking them to add anything that might have been missed by the survey. For a full overview of the questionnaire see appendix B.

Data was collected by way of an online survey, which was performed through Qualtrics (Qualtrics, Provo, UT). Data collection ran from the middle of April until beginning of June 2024. Participants were recruited through posters, social media and emails.

Statistical analysis was performed with SPSS version 28 (IBM Corp.). Additional analysis was performed with JASP version 18.0.3 (JASP team). Data will be stored for 10 years in the database of the Rijksuniversiteit Groningen, before being deleted. To differentiate

between the groups of educators and students a factor was created that assigned a 0 to students and a 1 to educators. For ease of use, when an analysis was run through SPSS with this factor, the 0 and 1 were manually changed in the tables to reflect their designated groups.

Prior to starting data collection, the Ethics Committee from the Psychology Department approved the planned methods of the research (with research code: PSY-2324-S-0322), as well as the suggested ways of ensuring the anonymity and confidentiality of the participants.

Procedure

The survey took approximately 20 minutes to complete. Participants had to select themselves if their primary role in higher education was as a student or as an educator. All participants were informed of their right to quit at any time before giving consent, and that our aim was to understand how students and faculty members of the university perceived the purpose of university education. Firstly, participants were asked if their primary role in university is to be a student or a teacher. Afterwards, all participants were asked general questions about their demographic information, including gender, age, nationality, and for the students also their GPA and what year they were in. Participants in the student group were asked to rate nine items with reasons as to why they are studying. Both groups were then asked to rate nine items with reasons they would advise a friend or loved one to study for. All participants were asked about their general personal sense of purpose, before being asked the main group of questions. Finally, participants were asked to answer a single open question, where they could add anything they felt the survey had missed.

Overview of the Analysis

The dependent variable in our analysis is the perception of current feeling of purpose in life, whilst the independent variables are the averages of the outcome scores of participants' beliefs and attitudes of the different theories (Credentialism, Pragmatism, Social

Reproduction Theory, Bildung, Humanistic Theory and Critical Pedagogy), separated between how they belief things should be and how they belief things currently are. Questions measuring the different theories were identified in the survey, of which scores for each participant were averaged in the different variables, where 'Credentialist Attitudes' being an average of the scores for their attitudes towards how credentialist the current field of higher education is, 'Credentialist Beliefs' being an average of the scores for their beliefs towards how credentialist higher education should be, this is the same for all the other variables. For the dependent variable the scores of the three questions on perceived strength of purpose in life were averaged. This variable is called 'Purpose Average'. All of the answers on the survey were given in either --, -, |, +, ++, thus the answers were turned into numbers: -2, -1, 0, 1, 2.

Before starting the analysis, a sample size test will be performed to assess the probability that a test will correctly reject a false null hypothesis, which is also known as power. To separate the two groups (Students and Educators), a variable was created called 'Group', in which Students were given the value '0' and Educators the value '1'. To test the hypotheses, first some descriptive analyses on the 13 variables ('Credentialist Attitudes', 'Credentialist Beliefs', 'Pragmatist Attitudes', 'Pragmatist Beliefs', 'Humanistic Attitudes', 'Humanistic Beliefs', 'Critical Pedagogy Attitudes', 'Critical Pedagogy Beliefs', 'Bildung Attitudes', 'Bildung Beliefs', 'Social Reproduction Attitudes', 'Social Reproduction Beliefs', 'Purpose Average') will be conducted. Assumptions of linearity, normality, and absence of outliers will be checked for each of the variables. Then a Spearman's rank correlation will be performed with 'Credentialist Attitudes', 'Credentialist Beliefs', 'Pragmatist Attitudes', 'Pragmatist Beliefs', 'Humanistic Attitudes', 'Humanistic Beliefs', 'Critical Pedagogy Attitudes', 'Critical Pedagogy Beliefs', 'Bildung Attitudes', 'Bildung Beliefs', 'Social

Reproduction Attitudes', 'Social Reproduction Beliefs' as the independent variables and 'Purpose Average' as the dependent variable.

Results

The purpose of this study was to examine if there are relationships between students' and educators' beliefs and attitudes of certain theories of higher education on their perceived strength of purpose in life. The analysis was conducted by performing separate Spearman's rank order correlation tests for each of the variables on perceived strength of purpose in life.

Descriptive statistics

Descriptive statistics for the main variables are presented in Table 1. The means and standard deviations for average scores of beliefs and attitudes towards Credentialism, Pragmatism, Social Reproduction Theory, Bildung, Humanistic Theory, Critical Pedagogy and perceived strength of purpose in life are reported separately for students, educators, and total.

Table 1

Descriptive Statistics: Means and standard deviations of all variables

Variable	Group	N	Beliefs		Attitudes	
			M	SD	M	SD
Credentialism	Students	167	.9281	0.5912	.5688	0.5659
	Educators	35	.4952	0.7293	.7048	0.5126
	Total	202	.8531	0.6369	.6073	0.5582
Pragmatism	Students	167	.8174	0.4875	.1208	0.4962

	Educators	35	.4952	0.6829	.2619	0.4302
	Total	202	.7616	0.5387	.1452	0.4874
Humanistic Theory	Students	167	1.2555	0.4093	.1801	0.5043
	Educators	35	1.1810	0.4309	.4176	0.4753
	Total	202	1.2426	0.4129	.1745	0.4984
Critical Pedagogy	Students	167	.993	0.431	.202	0.475
	Educators	35	1.017	0.461	.311	0.528
	Total	202	.997	0.435	.190	0.484
Bildung	Students	167	.6950	0.3810	-.0918	0.4474
	Educators	35	.7105	0.4000	-.2476	0.4346
	Total	202	.6977	0.3818	-.1188	0.4474
Social Reproduction Theory	Students	167	-.3687	0.4780	.0223	0.4064
	Educators	35	-.3837	0.4671	.0898	0.5194
	Total	202	-.3712	0.4755	.0423	0.4146
Purpose in Life	Students	167			1.0020	0.7591
	Educators	35			.9333	0.7365
	Total	202			.9901	0.7538

This table shows the means of the average scores on each of the variables, grouped by students, educators and the total sample. From this it can be seen that the mean difference between students and educators is quite large for the variable 'Credentialist Beliefs'. The same can be observed for the variables 'Pragmatist Beliefs' and 'Humanistic Attitudes'. Furthermore, high positive scores can be observed for 'Humanistic Beliefs', 'Critical Pedagogy Beliefs' and 'Purpose Average'. Negative scores can be observed for 'Bildung Attitudes' and 'Social Reproduction Beliefs'. On average both groups seem to have the same beliefs and attitudes towards the theories.

Credentialism on Perceived Purpose in Life

A Spearman's rank-order correlation was run between beliefs and attitudes on Credentialism on perceived strength of purpose in life ('Purpose Average') for both students and educators. For students, the analysis revealed that 'Credentialist Attitudes' on 'Purpose Average' a small positive correlation was found $r_s = .181, p = .019$, which was statistically significant. For 'Credentialist Beliefs' on 'Purpose Average' a very small positive correlation $r_s = .096, p = .215$ was found, which was not statistically significant. For educators, the analysis revealed that for 'Credentialist Attitudes' on 'Purpose Average' a small positive correlation was found $r_s = .164, p = .347$, which was not statistically significant. For 'Credentialist Beliefs' on 'Purpose Average' a very small positive correlation was found $r_s = .038, p = .828$, which was not statistically significant.

Pragmatism on Perceived Purpose in Life

A Spearman's rank-order correlation was run between beliefs and attitudes on Pragmatism on perceived strength of purpose in life ('Purpose Average') for both students and educators. For students, the analysis revealed that for 'Pragmatist Attitudes' on 'Purpose Average' a small positive correlation could be found $r_s = .107, p = .168$ which was not statistically significant. For 'Pragmatist Beliefs' on 'Purpose Average' basically no

correlation was found $r_s = .001, p = .985$. For educators, the analysis revealed that for 'Pragmatist Attitudes' on 'Purpose Average' a very small positive correlation was found $r_s = .062, p = .723$ which was not statistically significant. For 'Pragmatist Beliefs' on 'Purpose Average' a very small positive correlation was found $r_s = .149, p = .393$, which was not statistically significant.

Humanistic Theory on Perceived Purpose in Life

A Spearman's rank-order correlation was run between beliefs and attitudes on Humanistic Theory on perceived strength of purpose in life ('Purpose Average') for both students and educators. For students, the analysis revealed that for 'Humanistic Attitudes' on 'Purpose Average' a very small positive correlation could be found $r_s = .050, p = .525$, which was not statistically significant. For 'Humanistic Beliefs' on 'Purpose Average' a small positive correlation was found $r_s = .103, p = .187$, which was not statistically significant. For educators, the analysis revealed that for 'Humanistic Attitudes' on 'Purpose Average' a very small negative correlation was found $r_s = -.127, p = .467$, which was not statistically significant. For 'Humanistic Beliefs' on 'Purpose Average' a small positive correlation was found $r_s = .277, p = .107$, which was not statistically significant.

Critical Pedagogy on Perceived Purpose in Life

A Spearman's rank-order correlation was run between beliefs and attitudes on Critical Pedagogy on perceived strength of purpose in life ('Purpose Average') for both students and educators. For students, the analysis revealed that for 'Critical Pedagogy Attitudes' on 'Purpose Average' a very small positive correlation could be found $r_s = .054, p = .486$, which was not statistically significant. For 'Critical Pedagogy Beliefs' on 'Purpose Average' a small positive correlation was found $r_s = .105, p = .175$, which was not statistically significant. For educators, the analysis revealed that for 'Critical Pedagogy Attitudes' on 'Purpose Average' a very small positive correlation was found $r_s = .013, p = .942$, which

was not statistically significant. For 'Critical Pedagogy Beliefs' on 'Purpose Average' a moderate positive correlation was found $r_s = .294, p = .087$, which was not statistically significant at $\alpha = 0.05$.

Bildung on Perceived Purpose in Life

A Spearman's rank-order correlation was run between beliefs and attitudes on Bildung on perceived strength of purpose in life ('Purpose Average') for both students and educators. For students, the analysis revealed that for 'Bildung Attitudes' on 'Purpose Average' a small positive correlation could be found $r_s = .124, p = .110$, which was not statistically significant. For 'Bildung Beliefs' on 'Purpose Average' a small positive correlation was found $r_s = .105, p = .178$, which was not statistically significant. For educators, the analysis revealed that for 'Bildung Attitudes' on 'Purpose Average' a very small negative correlation was found $r_s = -.013, p = .654$, which was not statistically significant. For 'Bildung Beliefs' on 'Purpose Average' a small positive correlation was found $r_s = .210, p = .226$, which was not statistically significant.

Social Reproduction Theory on Perceived Purpose in Life

A Spearman's rank-order correlation was run between beliefs and attitudes on Social Reproduction Theory on perceived strength of purpose in life ('Purpose Average') for both students and educators. For students, the analysis revealed that for 'Social Reproduction Attitudes' on 'Purpose Average' a small negative correlation could be found $r_s = -.154, p = .047$, which was statistically significant. For 'Social Reproduction Beliefs' on 'Purpose Average' a very small negative correlation was found $r_s = -.060, p = .443$, which was not statistically significant. For educators, the analysis revealed that for 'Social Reproduction Attitudes' on 'Purpose Average' a small negative correlation was found $r_s = -.106, p = .543$, which was not statistically significant. For 'Social Reproduction Beliefs' on 'Purpose

Average' a small negative correlation was found $r_s = -.252, p = .144$, which was not statistically significant.

Discussion

This study aimed to explore if there is a relationship between somebody's perceived strength of purpose in life and their perceived view on their beliefs and attitudes on certain philosophies of higher education. To test this hypothesis, several theories of higher education (Credentialism, Pragmatism, Social Reproduction Theory, Bildung, Humanistic Theory and Critical Pedagogy) were tested against perceived strength of purpose in life scores from data gathered through a survey. First the results of the descriptive analysis of average scores for each group will be discussed, before the correlational analysis for each philosophy of higher education on perceived strength of purpose in life will be analysed.

Philosophies of Higher Education on Purpose in Life.

In the preliminary descriptive analysis, some interesting results were found when looking at the similarities and differences of the average means for the students and educators' groups. First, students and educators seem to mostly agree on each topic, except for their beliefs on if Credentialism should be the primary purpose of higher education. It seems that students have a higher belief of this needing to be the case than educators. This might be in line with the results found by Guan and Blair (2021), where they found that, to a student, a degree is a legitimizing way of determining if someone is capable of a certain job. Additionally, the same difference between students and educators can be found within the beliefs on if Pragmatism should be the primary purpose of higher education. As one student indicated in our study: "I would like it to be more practical, like including internships to better prepare students for their career.". This seems to imply a very career-oriented outlook towards education. In fact, more students responded to our open question that they wanted more practical knowledge. This difference between students and educators seemed to already be

apparent in the results by Lopez and Fontela (2024), where it was found that a large group of educators considered the instillment of critical thinking skills in students to be very important, thus not so much the practical implication of the field that someone studies. In addition, the results by Sogunro (2014) can also be an attributing factor to this difference, as they concluded that knowing the practical implications of the field someone studies, can help in motivating students.

Students and educators also seem to agree that Humanistic Theory should be a primary reason for higher education. However, when looking at the differences between groups it seems that educators think that they are fostering an environment where teachers and students work together in the learning process more than students seem to perceive, which is in line with findings by Rowan, (2005). As Blakey (2021) indicated in her findings, students want to be part of what they study, and a teacher plays an important role in how much they feel a part of what they study. Further research into this topic is warranted, as it might help educators understand the reasons and motivations behind students, which in turn will help educators in the creation of their curriculum.

Linked to these findings are the averages of Critical Pedagogy for both groups, as it seems that the attitudes of Critical Pedagogy currently being a primary purpose of higher education is not very high in our survey, whilst the beliefs that Critical Pedagogy should be a primary purpose of higher education is rather high in our survey. This could indicate that higher educational institutions should aim even more to be a place where students and educators can voice their opinions without judgment.

The attitudes towards how much the theory of Bildung is currently one of the primary purposes of higher education seem to be low, indicating that the current system does not really foster education and knowledge essential for thriving in society within students. Both students and educators do seem to believe that Bildung should be one of the primary reasons

for studying within higher education. This difference can be explained by the fact that, for Bildung to take place, education has to be tailored to someone's personality, and when we take into consideration the mass with which education currently takes place, this is just not a doable undertaking (Yang, 2021).

Both groups seemed to agree that the current field of higher education is almost not based on Social Reproduction and both groups also seem to agree that maintaining and reproducing social classes should not be one of the primary reasons for higher education.

Average scores on the perceived strength of purpose in life seemed to be rather high among both groups. This means that on average most participants felt that they had a sense of direction and motivation towards certain goals.

According to our correlational analysis there seems to be a positive correlation between attitudes of Credentialism and purpose in life for students. This suggests that students who perceive Credentialism to be high in their environment, also report a higher perceived strength of purpose in life. Previous studies by Watty (2006), Brooks et al. (2020), and Guan and Blair (2021), found that a large proportion of students believe that the purpose of higher education is the preparation of working life, with credentials being the proof that one has been successfully prepared, are aligned with the results found in this paper. One would expect that if a student studies to be prepared for the working life, and these students believe that higher education currently exists to prepare them for the working life, that these students would feel a stronger sense of purpose in life.

No evidence that the relationship of attitudes on Credentialism on perceived strength of purpose in life is statistically significant for educators was found. Educators could find the credentials less important than the skills someone learns within higher education. This is in line with the results found by Lopez and Fontela (2024), who state that over a third of faculty

members believed that the development of critical thinking skills was an important goal of higher education.

For both groups no significance was found for beliefs towards how Credentialism should be on perceived strength of purpose in life.

No evidence for a significant correlation between beliefs and attitudes on Pragmatism on perceived purpose in life for both students and educators was found.

No evidence for a significant correlation between beliefs and attitudes on Humanistic Theory on perceived strength of purpose in life was found for both students and educators.

No evidence for a significant correlation between beliefs on Critical Pedagogy on perceived strength of purpose in life was found for both students and educators. There was also no evidence for a significant correlation between attitudes towards Critical Pedagogy on perceived strength of purpose in life for students. Evidence suggested that there is a positive correlation between attitudes towards Critical Pedagogy and perceived strength of purpose in life for educators at $\alpha = 0.10$, however not at the tested $\alpha = 0.05$. This might be because our sample size for educators is too small, or simply because the effect is not strong enough. The positive correlation for educators could be explained by the fact that according to this theory students should be taught how to think critically (Smith & Seal, 2021), something that can be linked to the importance of critical thinking skills being an important thing to cultivate in students according to the results by Lopez and Fontela (2024). It might therefore be that there is a positive correlation between educators' attitude towards Critical Pedagogy and perceived strength of purpose in life.

No evidence for a significant correlation between beliefs and attitudes on Bildung on perceived strength of purpose in life was found for both students and educators.

Evidence for a small negative correlation between attitudes on Social Reproduction Theory on perceived strength of purpose in life was found for students. This suggests that

students who perceive Social Reproduction Theory to be high in their environment, report a lower perceived strength of purpose in life. Since Social Reproduction Theory posits that one's socio-economic status should be leading in one's opportunities and future, and that universities should enforce this (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977), it seems logical that there is a negative relationship between Social Reproduction Theory and perceived strength of purpose in life for students. If someone has the feeling that their social environment is predetermined, it can lead to feelings of helplessness, which in turn can lead to a lower feeling of purpose in life (Calarco, 2018). As seen in our descriptive analysis in Table 1, the current attitude towards Social Reproduction is low across all groups, which indicates that there currently is no feeling within students or educators that the Rijksuniversiteit Groningen is influencing higher educational outcomes in the background. However, as one person indicated in the open question of our survey: "It could be (even) more accessible to people of all socio-economic backgrounds.". This might still indicate a belief that there are some socio-economic groups that cannot attain higher education.

No evidence was found for beliefs towards Social Reproduction Theory on perceived strength of purpose in life for students.

No evidence was found for beliefs and attitudes towards Social Reproduction Theory on perceived strength of purpose in life for educators.

Limitations

There were several limitations to the performed study. First, there are some issues with generalizability, as our sample mostly consisted of women and many of the participants studied or taught in the field of Psychology at the Rijksuniversiteit Groningen. Furthermore, our sample of educators only consisted of 35 participants, which could explain the weak results in this sample. Several scales have also been changed from the original scales, which leads to them losing their internal reliability. This could explain the significant results,

especially for the purpose in life scale (MEMS) which was shortened from 29 items to three and may thus not be accurate in predicting purpose in life. Furthermore, we did not use a validated survey, as we created a survey based on existing theories of higher education. Participants partook in this study by way of self-report; therefore, participants might have (unconsciously) answered through social desirability bias, response bias or due to respondent fatigue, which may have been caused by the length of our questionnaire. Further research could take a sample of participants from multiple universities. Furthermore, the survey scales could be split up into multiple segments along a larger study, taking place on different days, therefore making the used measures more reliable whilst considering the fatigue that respondents might experience with longer surveys.

Conclusion

The findings found in this paper seem to be in line with the results by Chan (2016), in that there seems to be little consensus between what higher education *is* and what higher education *should be*. However, most students seem to agree that higher education's purpose should be the preparation of working life, both through the gained credentials as the practical application of that which is learnt. This seems to be in line with earlier results found by Ardalan, Brooks et al., Guan and Blair, and Watty. Furthermore, the findings seem to indicate that a university which takes away the autonomy of a student, and which seems to be focused on reproducing social classes, has a negative impact on the perceived strength of purpose in life. In fact, the results seem to indicate that one of the most important aspects of higher education is the sense of belonging of a student to what they study and their ability to contribute freely to the classroom, without judgment. When it comes to the link between theories of higher education and perceived strength of purpose in life, it seems that the attitudes of students towards how Credentialist the current field of higher education is, is positively correlated with perceived strength of purpose in life. Recognizing this relationship

could potentially lead to a higher feeling of purpose in students, which could then lead to more motivation to finish their degree (George & Park, 2016). Seeing as a lot of people study within higher education it would be important to study the extent of this correlation more closely in future studies. In addition to this positive correlation, a small negative correlation between attitudes on Social Reproduction Theory on perceived strength of purpose in life was found. This indicates that it is important for universities to involve students in the process of learning, and that it is important for students to feel like their efforts are the reason for their success. It would be interesting to see if this same effect would be found in other countries. If these results could be replicated, they could inform policy reforms or teaching plans for educators to better facilitate the learning process of students.

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Appendix A: Descriptive Statistics of the Sample

A1

Gender

	Frequency	Percent
Female	146	72.3
Male	53	26.2
Non-binary	1	.5
Other (please specify)	1	.5
Prefer not to say	1	.5
Total	202	100.0

A2

Descriptive Statistics: Age

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Age	201	18	65	25.54	9.783

A3

Nationality

	Frequency	Percent

Austrian	1	.5
Brazilian	2	1.0
British	2	1.0
Bulgarian	3	1.5
Canadian	2	1.0
Chinese	2	1.0
Czech	1	.5
Dutch	95	47.0
Finnish	3	1.5
French	1	.5
German	47	23.3
Greek	1	.5
Hungarian	2	1.0
Indian	2	1.0
Irish	3	1.5
Italian	5	2.5
Japanese	1	.5
Lithuanian	1	.5
Luxembourgish	1	.5
Maltese	1	.5
None specified	6	3.0
Polish	1	.5
Romanian	8	4.0
Serbian	1	.5
Slovak	1	.5
Slovenian	4	2.0

Spanish	2	1.0
Swedish	1	.5
Turkish	1	.5
U.S.	1	.5
Total	202	100.0

A4

Group frequency

	Frequency	Percent
Students	167	82.7
Educators	35	17.3
Total	202	100.0

A.5

Study year

	Frequency	Percent
Educators	35	17.3
1st year	59	29.2
2nd year	34	16.8

3rd year	58	28.7
4th year	12	5.9
Other (please specify)	4	2.0
Total	202	100.0

Appendix B: Survey

Start of Block: Block 1

Q1 Dear participant,

Thank you for agreeing to take part in this survey, which is part of our Bachelor thesis project.

Our aim is to understand how students and faculty members of the University perceive the

purpose of university education. Our focus is on describing these perceptions among students

and faculty members, how they may affect interactions between students and faculty along

with how they display engagement with university education on a personal level. We will ask

you for statements about different viewpoints regarding university education and its purpose.

All answers will be collected anonymously and will not be traceable to you as an individual.

Your responses will only be available to our research team. We do not expect this survey to

have any negative impact on you, as all we are asking about will be a description of your

thoughts towards education. However, we understand that we are currently all living in

straining times and we would like you to be aware that you can quit this survey at any time

you feel uncomfortable. This will not have any negative consequences for you.

We strongly recommend the use of a laptop or computer for the most comfortable survey-

taking experience.

At the end of this survey, you are asked if you want to participate in the lottery, where we will

give away five €30 vouchers. Participation in this lottery is completely voluntary. Your

contact information will be saved separately from your responses.

Lastly, if there are any questions about your data, our survey, withdrawing from the study or

you have any complaints, you are free to send an email to our thesis supervisor: Dr. A.

Sarampalis (a.sarampalis@rug.nl)

By agreeing below, you agree to having read this consent form and understood the general

idea of this research, to the collection and storage of your data, and that you have been informed of your rights.

Thank you for your time and care in completing this brief survey,

Saran Akhbari

Mats Benninghaus

Eva Brank

Daffa Alfikri Alamsyah

Paulien Kiewiet

Max van der Schoor

- I consent (1)

- I do not consent (2)

Skip To: End of Survey If Q1 = I do not consent

End of Block: Block 1

Start of Block: Block 4

Q2 What is your primary role in university education?

- Educator (1)

- Student (2)

End of Block: Block 4

Start of Block: Block 5

Q3 How old are you? (in years)

Q4 What gender do you identify as?

- Male (1)

- Female (2)

- Non-binary (3)

- Other (please specify) (4) _____

- Prefer not to say (5)

Q5 What is your nationality?

- Dutch (1)

- Other (please specify) (2) _____

Display This Question: If Q2 = Student

Q6 Which level of education do you currently follow?

- Bachelor (1)

- Master (2)

- PhD (3)

- Already graduated from RUG (4)

- Other (please specify) (5) _____

Display This Question: If Q2 = Student

Q7 What program do you currently follow?

- Psychology (1)

- Sociology (2)

- Pedagogy and Educational Sciences (3)

- Other (please specify) (4) _____

Display This Question: If Q2 = Student

Q8 Which year of your study program are you currently in?

- 1st year (1)

- 2nd year (2)

- 3rd year (3)

- 4th year (4)

- Other (please specify) (5) _____

Display This Question: If Q2 = Educator

Q9 What program do you mainly teach in?

- Psychology (1)

- Sociology (2)

- Pedagogy and Educational Sciences (3)

- Other (please specify) (4) _____

Display This Question: If Q2 = Educator

Q10 What is your job title at your institution?

- PhD Student (1)

- Lecturer (2)

- Assistant Professor (3)

- Adjunct Professor (5)

- Full Professor (6)

- Other (please specify) (7) _____

End of Block: Block 5

Start of Block: Block 10

Display this Question: If Q2 = Student

Q11 Rate the following values based on your own reasons for studying at university.

I study to…

	Does not describe me (16)	Describes me slightly well (17)	Describes me moderately well (18)	Describes me very well (19)	Describes me extremely well (20)
Obtain a degree (1)					
Gain knowledge in my field of choice (2)					
Meet the expectations of family and friends (3)					
Postpone starting a professional career (4)					

Develop a social network (5)					
Develop a professional network (6)					
Explore my interests (7)					
Develop my potential as a person (8)					
Improve my job opportunities (9)					

End of Block: Block 10

Start of Block: Block 11

	Does not describe me (11)	Describes me slightly well (12)	Describes me moderately well (13)	Describes me very well (14)	Describes me extremely well (15)
Obtain a degree (1)					
Gain knowledge in ones field of choice (2)					
Meet the expectations of family and friends (3)					
Postpone starting a professional career (4)					
Develop a social network (5)					
Develop a professional network (6)					
Explore ones interests (7)					

Develop ones potential as a person (8)		
Improve their job opportunities (9)		

Q12 Imagine a friend or loved one is at the age when they're considering going to University.

Rate the following values based on what you would advise your friend/loved one to study for.

I would advise my friend/loved one to study to...

Q13 For the next few items we will ask you to rate different statements on a 5-point scale. In all cases, (--) indicates completely disagree, while a (++) indicates completely agree. The midpoint (|) should be selected when your opinion is neutral or if you do not have an opinion at all.

- I understand (1)

End of Block: Block 5

Start of Block: Block 14

	Strongly disagree (--) (1)	Disagree (-) (2)	Neither agree nor disagree (	) (3)	Agree (+) (4)	Strongly agree (++) (5)
I have certain life goals that compel me to keep going (1)					
I have overarching goals that guide me in my life (2)					
I have goals in life that are very important to me (3)					

Q14 Firstly, we would like to ask three questions on your personal sense of purpose, in general

End of Block: Block 14

Start of Block: Block 16

	University students **SHOULD** be taught to					University students **ARE** taught to				
	-- (1)	- (2)	| (3)	+ (4)	++ (5)	-- (1)	- (2)	| (3)	+ (4)	++ (5)
Be more adaptive to a changing environment (1)										
Discover their interests (2)										
Develop personal skills (e.g., self-awareness, resilience, independence) (3)										
Develop social skills (e.g., communication, empathy) (4)										
Develop professional skills (e.g., teamwork, planning) (5)										
Shape their identity (6)										
Prepare for their career (e.g., make a LinkedIn profile, write professional emails) (7)										
Learn critical thinking skills (8)										
Expand personal network (9)										
Develop personal ethics (10)										
Contemplate societal issues (11)										

Develop professional ethics (12)

Think creatively (13)

Cultivate a sense of personal
responsibility (e.g., be proactive,
accountable) (14)

Prioritize education over other
interests (15)

	University educators SHOULD aim to					University educators DO aim to				
	-- (1)	- (2)	| (3)	+ (4)	++ (5)	-- (1)	- (2)	| (3)	+ (4)	++ (5)
Create a space where everyone's opinions are heard (1)										
Create an interactive classroom environment (2)										
Learn from students (3)										
Instill factual knowledge and skills onto their students (4)										
Instill applicable knowledge and skills onto their students (5)										
Teach about societal problems (6)										
Foster rapports with fellow university personnel (7)										

Foster rapports with students (8)

Prioritize education over other interests (9)

Be an authority figure (10)

Not impose a strong political direction in the classroom (11)

Q15 Next, we would like you to state to which degree you disagree or agree with the following statements.

You will see that every statement has two of these 5-point scales to answer: one is to indicate your beliefs on what the purpose of education should be, while the other is to rate how you believe that education currently is.

The following statements ask about the content of university education.Q16 The following statements ask about the **role of educators within the university**.

Rate to which degree you **disagree** or **agree** with these statements.

End of Block: Block 16

Start of Block: Block 17

	Universities **SHOULD** aim to					Universities **DO** aim to				
	-- (1)	- (2)	| (3)	+ (4)	++ (5)	-- (1)	- (2)	| (3)	+ (4)	++ (5)

Provide a studying environment in which students of various socioeconomic backgrounds can be succesful (1)

Adapt to students' needs (e.g., physical and/or mental disabilities, sudden injury) (2)

Prepare people for jobs most needed in society (3)

Share knowledge across different cultural groups (4)

Prioritize educating gifted students (5)

Expand the knowledge of humankind (6)

Make society more productive (7)

Develop global citizenship through its students (8)

Develop a culture of lifelong learning (9)

Include practical courses that resemble real life in education programs (10)

Improve its status on global rankings (11)

Offer support to students, staff, etc., in times of crisis (12)

Q17 The following statements ask about the role of universities within higher education.

Rate to which degree you disagree or agree with these statements.

End of Block: Block 17

Start of Block: Block 18

Display This Question: If Q2 = Student

Q18 What do you estimate your Grade Average to be in your current program?

- 6 or lower (1)

- 6-7 (2)

- 7-8 (3)

- 8-9 (4)

- 9 or higher (5)

- Prefer not to say/I don't know (6)

Display This Question: If Q2 = Student

	Extremely dissatisfied (1)	Somewhat dissatisfied (2)	Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied (3)	Somewhat satisfied (4)	Extremely satisfied (5)
Satisfaction level (1)					

Q19 Overall, how satisfied are you with your experience as a university student?

End of Block: Block 18

Start of Block: Block 19

Display This Question: If Q2 = Educator

	Extremely dissatisfied (1)	Somewhat disatisfied (2)	Neither satisfied nor disatisfied (3)	Somewhat satisfied (4)	Extremely satisfied (5)
Satisfaction level (1)					

Q20 Overall, how satisfied are you with your experience as a university educator?

End of Block: Block 19

Start of Block: Block 20

	1 Not at all true (1)	**2 Hardly true** (2)	**3 Moderately true** (3)	**4 Exactly true** (4)
I always manage to solve difficult problems if I try hard enough (1)				
If someone opposes me, I can find means and ways to get what I want (2)				
It is easy for me to stick to my aims and accomplish my goals (3)				
I am confident that I could deal efficiently with unexpected events (4)				
Thanks to my resourcefulness, I know how to handle unforeseen situations (5)				
I can solve most problems if I invest the necessary effort (6)				

I can remain calm when facing difficulties because I can rely on my coping abilities (8)

When I am confronted with a problem, I can usually find several solutions (9)

If I am in a bind, I can usually think of something to do (10)

No matter what comes my way, I'm usually able to handle it (11)

Q21 Rate each statement on how well it reflects how you feel about yourself.

End of Block: Block 20

Start of Block: Block 21

Q22 Having answered all of these questions, do you have something to add that pertains to the purpose of university education (what it should or should not be, what is currently is or is not)?

End of Block: Block 21

Start of Block: Block 22

Q23 Thank you for your participation in our survey.

Please leave your email address here if you want to enter to win a €30 voucher. Participation is completely voluntary; your email address will not be connected to the rest of your responses.

- No, I would not like to participate (1)

["