The Purpose Fulfilment Gap; What Students and Educators Think About University Education

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Abstract

This study examines the perspectives of students and educators on the extent to which university education is fulfilling its purpose. A questionnaire was developed to evaluate how university education 'should be' compared to how it 'is', from both student and educator perspectives. This questionnaire was distributed among a sample of university students (N = 167) and educators (N = 35). The key findings indicate significant gaps between current and perceived purposes of university education, as evaluated by students and educators. The topics with the greatest gaps were related to the need for inclusivity, practical courses, career preparation and feeling supported. There was no significant difference in perceived purposes between educators and students, and upon closer examination, it was evident that they mostly agreed on the areas that require improvement. The findings suggest a need for alignment between educational policies and practices to more effectively fulfil the expectations of stakeholders. These insights contribute to ongoing discussions about educational reforms and the evolving role of university education in a rapidly changing world.

Keywords: University Education, Higher Education, Purpose, Students, Educators

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Education

The research that universities provide plays an important role in our society. It is, for example, furthering the understanding of physical and mental illnesses, climate change, and space. In addition, university research is necessary for policymakers to make evidence based decisions (Gordon & Conaway, 2020). Recognising the importance of universities, the European Union aims to have 45% of its citizens hold a higher education degree by 2030 (Official Journal, 2021). At the same time, more students are showing interest in obtaining a university degree, according to CBS (2023). To demonstrate, the number of first-time students enrolled at Dutch universities went from nearly 53 thousand in 2011 to almost 75 thousand in 2023 (*CBS Statline*, 2024.). This highlights the growing demand for university education and the increasing presence academia has in people's lives.

In this quickly evolving world, it is important to comprehend the purpose of university education. To start, the rate of technological innovation is rising drastically (Roser, 2023). In particular, breakthroughs in artificial intelligence have radically altered industries and the labour market (Frank et al., 2019). This suggests that there is a shift occurring in the nature of work that involves the emergence of new occupations and the transformation or complete elimination of traditional ones. Furthermore, the world is currently experiencing rapid globalisation (Steger, 2023), through the almost inexpendable phone, the internet, and subsequently social media platforms. This has resulted in a state of worldwide interconnectedness. In this interconnected world where a foreign culture is only a click away, it is important for university students to be globally and culturally aware. The increase in the number of international students in the Netherlands over the past few years is evidence that, in addition to globalisation, the field of education is becoming more diverse. In 2011/2012 the number of international first year university students was 15.5%, and in 2023/2024 this has

increased to international students making up 21% of the first year students (CBS, 2024). The diversification of education could imply that the needs of students are also transforming. To summarise, with the quick pace of global change, it becomes especially important to investigate the purposes of university education to ensure its continued relevance, inclusivity, and efficiency in preparing individuals to thrive and make valuable contributions in an ever-changing global environment.

However, describing the purpose of universities proves to be a complex task, given the various perspectives in literature. According to a literature review by Chan (2016), the historic purpose of universities was to improve society at large, for example, by preparing men to be suitable leaders. In the same study, he also mentions that in modern society, the purpose of a university is to provide economic and societal benefits. In this case, economic benefits are defined as individual and private benefits, which could include getting a higher paying job. In contrast, societal benefits serve the public, for example, by increasing global citizenship. Kezars (2004) literature review finds a purpose similar to Chan's. She argues that universities' focus may be shifting from serving society to serving economic goals. This viewpoint would include having lectures as the main teaching method because this is a way of educating a large number of students at once. This could entail that educators would have to spend less time teaching because they teach one big class instead of multiple small ones. In addition, a literature review on the content of American university websites found that they advertise their purpose mostly as a pursuit of credentials rather than knowledge (Saichaie & Morphew, 2014). Engwall (2020), however, proposes that universities serve two fundamental functions: the transmission of established knowledge and the generation of new knowledge through research.

Another way of investigating the purpose of university education is to ask stakeholders directly. Students are some of the most predominant stakeholders in universities,

as there are many students and they are the ones paying for their education. Chan's (2016) found that although quite some students found the purpose of university education to be 'learning about things that interest me' and to 'gain general education and appreciation of ideas', the vast majority of students identified the purpose of higher education as 'getting a good job'. Similarly, a study spanning six European countries by Brooks et al. (2020) found that students primarily view higher education as a means to prepare for the labour market. However, Brooks et al. (2020) also observed that students acknowledge its role in personal development and societal contribution. Besides examining the perspective of students, it is also important to look at the perspective of educators. After all, they are directly involved in the conduct of said education. Watty (2006) found agreement among educators on the most promoted purpose of higher education, namely that of delivering efficient teaching and creating work-ready graduates.

By examining the studies of Watty (2006) and Brooks et al. (2020), it could be possible to conclude that some of the purposes of university education, such as preparation for the labour market, overlap between the views of students and educators. However, Chan (2016) mentions that there is a possible disconnect between educators and students' perceived purposes of university education. This is important because educators' beliefs about education can impact their teaching approach, and the quality of the learning experience (Northcote, 2009). In addition, Watty (2006) found that educators observed a difference between what the purpose of education is (belief) and what it should be (attitude). As mentioned before, the educators believed that promoting work ready graduates and delivering efficient teaching are currently the main purposes of university education. However, when asked what the purpose of education should be, their attitude towards the purpose of education was different. Their attitudes about the purpose were to develop critical reasoning, to promote lifelong learning, and assist in the formation of intellectual abilities and perspectives. Similarly, Brooks et al.

(2020) found that students' perceptions of the purpose of higher education often focused on idealised notions (what it should be, attitude) rather than actual reality (what it is, belief). Although these findings imply that there is a gap in how well university education is fulfilling its purpose, there is no clear indication of what to do with such a finding. For instance, Watty (2006) calls for a lack of framework and accordingly came up with their own research paradigm. In this study, the *purpose fulfilment gap* is defined as a measure of the difference between what university education 'should be' doing and 'is' doing. Apart from the findings of Watty (2006) and Brooks et al. (2020), there is limited research on the perceived purpose fulfilment of university education. This is a valuable topic to explore because a potential discrepancy between the perceived and actual purposes of universities, could impact the quality of the learning experience. For example, do students believe the purpose of university is to gain knowledge in their field of choice, or do they seek to develop additional skills and experience student life during their studies? Is an educator's purpose limited to instilling traditional knowledge, or should they strive to adapt to students needs? Are universities expected to provide more than simply a space for learning?

Understanding the role of universities is important because their affiliation affects millions of lives. Exploring the views of educators and students can highlight gaps between the perceived purpose of universities and how well they fulfil them. Uncovering these differences can inform the development of effective educational policies and practices, ensuring that institutions meet the needs and expectations of all parties involved. Investigating the purpose fulfilment gap could reveal important areas where educational institutions may need to realign their objectives with the evolving expectations of their stakeholders. Failure to address this gap could lead to several harmful consequences, including decreased student satisfaction and engagement, a mismatch between graduates' skills and labour market demands, and a reduction in the overall quality and relevance of higher education. This

analysis may reveal specific aspects of educational delivery that require improvement, such as areas where the curriculum does not fully prepare students for the workforce, teaching aims that are not engaging or effective, or insufficient development of critical thinking skills. By identifying these gaps, educational institutions can make targeted improvements, ultimately leading to more effective and satisfying educational experiences.

This study will explore the gap between the perceived purposes of university education and how well it is fulfilling them, according to different stakeholders in universities. It will do so through a questionnaire aimed at students and educators. Given the limited research on this topic, this study adopts a descriptive and exploratory approach to gain new insights and establish an initial framework for the topic. The aim is to provide a detailed account of the current situation and to uncover new insights, patterns, and relationships that have not yet been fully explored or understood. By doing so, the study seeks to fill existing gaps in the literature and lay the groundwork for future research. Hence, the research questions are of an open-ended nature. In this study, the following questions will be explored: 1) To what extent does university education fulfil its perceived purpose, according to university students and educators? and 2) What are the main differences in the purpose fulfilment gap of university education between university students and university educators?

Methods

Participants

In total, 338 individuals participated in this study. However, after analysing the data, 136 participants were excluded. 129 participants were excluded because they did not complete the questionnaire; two were excluded because they did not agree to informed consent; four were excluded because they finished the survey in under 300 seconds, suggesting they did not take the time to properly read the questions and think about the answers; and one was excluded because it did not appear that they grasped the aim of the questionnaire and

answered almost entirely in extremes. After exclusion, 202 valid entries remained. Among these, 167 indicated their primary role as students, and 35 indicated they were educators. For the students, ages ranged from 18 to 37, with a mean age of 22 (SD = 2.61). Amongst the students, 130 women participated and 35 men; 2 indicated their gender as 'other'. The main nationality of the students was Dutch (47.9%). Most students were studying psychology (64.7%), and most were in their first year of studying (35.9%). This meant most of the student participants were doing their bachelors (88%). For the educators, ages ranged from 21 to 65, with a mean age of 44 (SD = 10.90). Of the educators, 16 were women, 18 were men, and 1 indicated their gender as 'other'. Most educators had a Dutch nationality (42.9%), and taught in the psychology programme (65.7%). Participants were recruited using posters, the social media network of the author, and the SONA system. Some participants received SONA credits for their participation, and others had a chance to partake in a giveaway of five 30-euro dinner vouchers. The Ethics Board of the University of Groningen approved the study before participants were contacted. For a full overview of all demographics, see Appendix A for students and Appendix B for educators.

Materials and Instruments

The questionnaire was designed and presented using Qualtrics XM. In the first section of the questionnaire, participants were asked to provide demographic information, including age, gender, nationality, and university-related details such as study level, study programme, academic year, and average grade. Educators were asked to specify the programme they teach and their job title as well. In addition to the demographics, there were scales that assessed why students study, why educators and students recommend a loved one to study, what university education is and should be like, self-efficacy, satisfaction, general-purpose and an open question. Due to the use of this questionnaire in several studies, certain scales were omitted from this particular study. One of the excluded scales assessed the reasons for

studying, why students study, and why educators and students recommend a loved one to study. Furthermore, this study did not consider the subscales of satisfaction, self-efficacy and general purpose. The answers to the open question were also not considered. To view the content and layout of the entire questionnaire, see Appendix D.

Statement Generation

We formulated statements for the primary sections of the questionnaire by drawing on educational theories such as critical pedagogy, functionalism, social capital theory, credentialism, and human capital theory. These frameworks help understand the goals and purposes of university education. All statements in the questionnaire were based on one or more of these theories, resulting in an extensive compilation of statements. The statements were then carefully revised by eliminating duplications, ensuring clarity and simplicity, and eliminating statements that were unclear or open to many interpretations. The objective was to offer a wide range of statements that represent different educational theories while ensuring that the text remained easy to read. In addition, the statements were categorised according to their relevance and presented in a way that required participants to read the question just once. To illustrate, the question would be 'Students should be taught to…' and all items would be aligned with this sentence, such as 'Develop personal ethics'.

Should and Is Scales

We structured the statements to assess participants' perceptions of how education should be versus how it is. This scale was used to determine the purpose fulfilment gap. Utilising a 5-point Likert scale ranging from "-- (completely disagree)" to "++ (completely agree)," respondents were asked to evaluate each statement along two dimensions: ideal expectations and current reality. The statements were organised into three blocks. The first block comprised 15 statements concerning the content of university education, which prompted participants to assess what university students should be taught versus what they are

taught (such as, students should be taught to 'develop personal skills (e.g., self-awareness, resilience, independence)" or students are taught to 'contemplate societal issues'). The second block consisted of 11 statements focusing on the role of university educators, with prompts differentiating between what educators should aim to do and what they actually aim to do (e.g., educators should aim to 'Create an interactive classroom environment' and educators do aim to 'Be an authority figure'). The third block included statements regarding the role of universities themselves, with prompts differentiating between the aims of universities and actual practices (e.g., universities should aim to 'Provide a studying environment in which students of various economic backgrounds can be successful' and universities do aim to 'Prioritise educating gifted students').

Procedure

Participants were given the option to access the questionnaire through either a URL or a QR code. The questionnaire commenced with a brief introduction outlining the study's objectives. Upon consenting to participate, participants were prompted to identify their primary role in education as either a student or an educator. Both groups were then directed to complete demographic information, including age, gender, and nationality. Students were further prompted to specify their educational level, programme, and academic year, while educators were asked questions about the programme they teach and their job title.

Following the demographic section, students were asked to rate their personal reasons for studying. Similarly, educators and students were asked to rate the reasons they would advise a friend or loved one to pursue studying. Subsequently, participants received a brief explanation of how to respond to the subsequent questions and were required to acknowledge their understanding before proceeding. Participants then addressed three statements regarding their general sense of purpose. Upon completion, they proceeded to the next section, where they responded to statements presented in two columns, indicating the extent to which they

believed these statements should be taught, and they are taught to students by the university. This method of response was repeated for subsequent sections, including 11 statements regarding the aims of educators within the university and 12 statements concerning the aims of universities in higher education.

After completing the main questionnaire, students estimated their average grade. Additionally, both students and educators rated their satisfaction with their university experience. Following this, both groups completed the self-efficacy scale. Subsequently, participants responded to a mandatory open question inviting additional comments on the purpose of university education. Finally, participants were thanked for their participation and offered the opportunity to enter a lottery for 30-euro dinner vouchers.

Results

In this study, the purpose fulfilment gap is defined as a measure of the difference between what university education 'should be' doing and 'is' doing. In this results section, we will be looking at two ways of calculating this gap. A single overall purpose fulfilment gap will be calculated from all scores, and individual purpose fulfilment gaps will be calculated for each item. The individual purpose fulfilment gaps are calculated by subtracting an item's 'is' score from its 'should' score. Since the 'should' and 'is' scores both range from -2 to 2, the difference between them therefore ranges from -4 to 4. The overall purpose fulfilment gap is a measure of the size of the gap across the entire questionnaire. It is calculated by taking the absolute value of each individual purpose fulfilment gap and averaging those, and thus ranges from 0 to 4. The reasoning behind taking the absolute value is that the direction of the gap does not necessarily contain information about whether the gap is perceived as something positive or negative by a participant.

Student Perspective

Table 1

One-sample t-test Students

|	N	Mean	SD	Std. Error Mean	t-value	Two-Sided p-value
Overall Purpose Fulfilment Gap	38	.90	.35	.06	t(37) = 15.69	p < .001

In order to evaluate the question "To what extent does university education fulfil its perceived purpose, according to university students?", we start by looking at the overall purpose fulfilment gap that university students reported. The overall purpose fulfilment gap, as reported by students, was M = .90 (SD = 0.35). The mean shows a moderate gap between the ideal state of university education and its current state. In order to assess the significance of this score, a one-sample t-test was performed, resulting in a t score of t(166) = 15.69, p <.001. This demonstrates that the overall purpose fulfilment gap is significantly different from zero.

The overall purpose fulfilment gap that students perceive is M = 0.90 (SD = 0.35), but some items show a larger gap than others. This indicates that students' perceptions about the degree to which university education fulfils its perceived purpose vary depending on the item. In Figure 2, the items that show the largest gaps between "should" and "is" for students are items 28, 36, 27, and 38. Figure 2 illustrates that item 28 ("Universities should/do aim to adapt to students' needs (e.g., physical and/or mental disabilities, sudden injury)") has the largest purpose fulfilment gap. Students rate this as happening only a little but believe it should happen much more. A similar observation can be made about other items, including item 27 ("Universities should/do aim to provide a studying environment in which students of various backgrounds can be successful"). It is interesting that the four items with the largest gaps belong to the category "Universities should/do aim to...". Another item that stands out is

item 6 ("Students should be/are taught to shape their identity"). Figure 1 shows that item 6 has the lowest 'is' score, suggesting that students find that shaping their identity occurs the least. Figure 1 illustrates that the majority of items indicate a greater value for "should" compared to "is", as indicated by all the items to the right of the diagonal line. Yet, this does not apply to every item. The item with the greatest negative difference, is item 15 ("Students should be/are taught to prioritise education over other interests"). Figure 2 clearly shows a substantial gap in scores between "should" and "is" for this category. However, not all items demand change. Figure 1 illustrates that items 33 and 19 are in close proximity to the diagonal line, suggesting that they are fulfilling their intended aim. These items also have the lowest gap scores, as shown in Figure 2. Consequently, item 33 ("Universities should/do aim to make society more productive") and item 19 ("Educators should/do aim to instill factual knowledge and skills in their students") are happening about as much as they should, according to students.

Figure 1

Means per Item Should and Is: Students and Educators
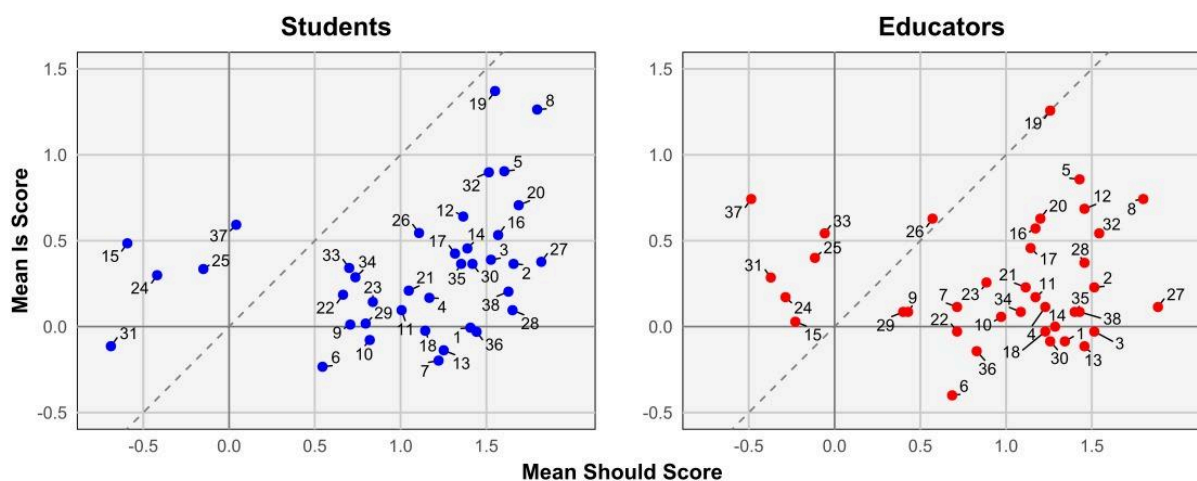
Note. In these scatterplots, the Y-axis is the mean score of an item's 'Is' score, and the X-axis is the mean score of an item's 'Should' score Each item is represented by a number, see

Appendix C. The closer a point is to the diagonal line, the closer an item is to fulfilling its perceived purpose. The left plot, with the blue dots, shows the answers per item for students. The right plot, with the red dots, is for educators.

Figure 2

Absolute Mean Gap Scores per Item: Students and Educators
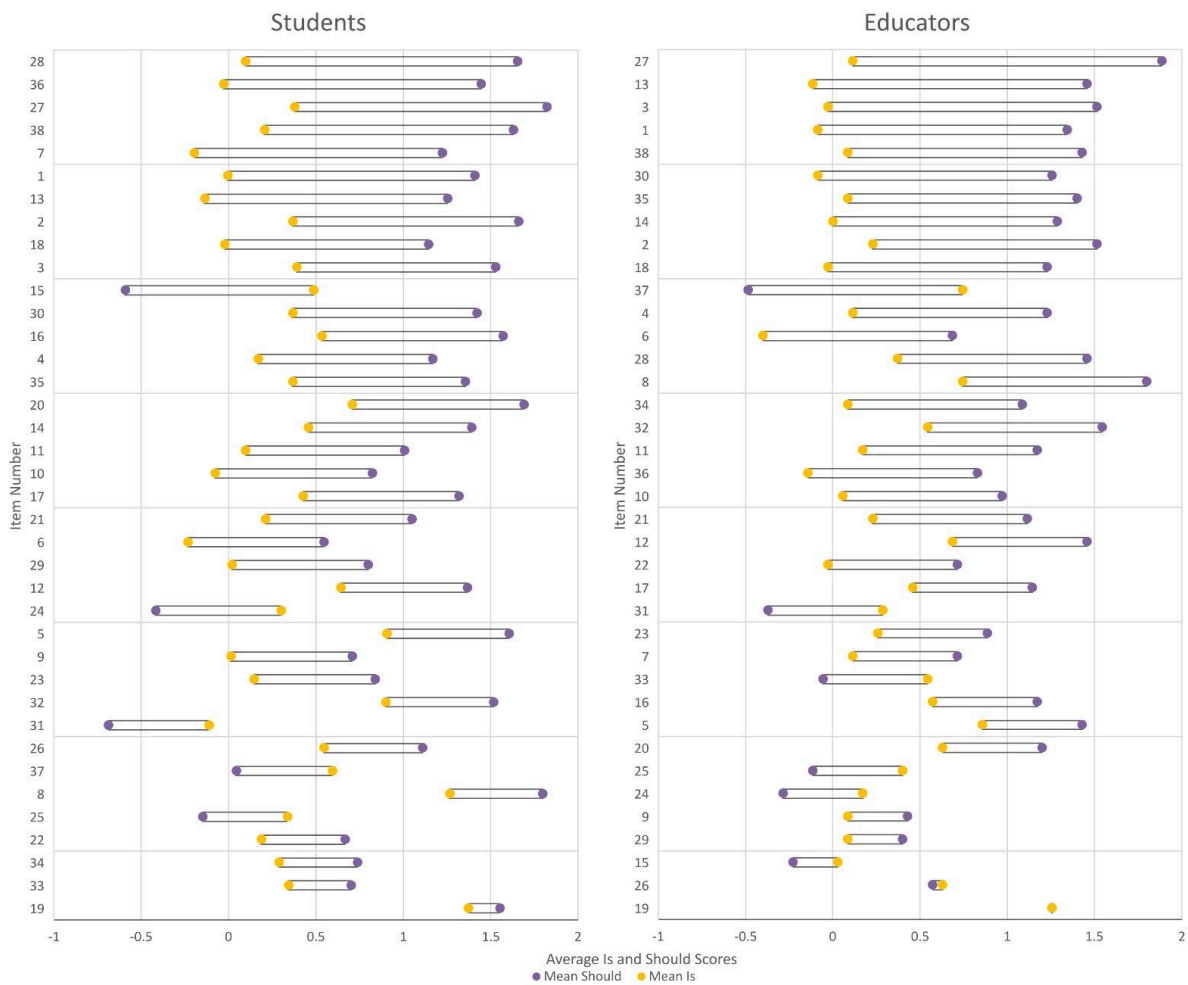
Note. In this bar graph, the yellow dot represents the mean score of an item's 'is' score and the purple dot represents the mean of an item's 'should' score. Each item is represented by a number, see Appendix C. The lines in between a yellow and a purple dot represent the difference between the two. The items are rated from the largest absolute purpose fulfilment

gap to the smallest, according to students on the left and educators on the right.

Educator Perspective

Table 2

One-Sample t-test Educators

	N	Mean	SD	Std. Error Mean	t-value	Two-Sided p-value
Overall Purpose Fulfilment Gap	38	.89	.43	.07	t(37) = 12.80	p < .001

In order to assess educators' perceptions of how university education fulfils its purpose, we begin by analysing the overall purpose fulfilment gap, M = 0.89 (SD = 0.43). A one-sample t-test was performed to determine if this score was significant, yielding a t score of t(34) = 12.80, p < .001. This indicates that the overall purpose fulfilment of university education is significantly different from zero. Figures 1 and 2 demonstrate that some items show a larger purpose fulfilment gap than others. Some of the items that educators find in need of change are item 27 ("Universities should/do aim to provide a studying environment in which students of various backgrounds can be successful"), 13, 3, and 1 ("Students should/are taught to: think creatively (13); develop personal skills (e.g., self-awareness, resilience, independence) (3); be more adaptive to a changing environment (1)"). According to Figure 2, educators acknowledge that item 27 is being handled to a certain degree. However, they strongly believe that universities should strive for creating a more inclusive environment that promotes success for all individuals. Figure 1 also clearly indicates that item 27 has the highest 'should' score for educators. For items 13, 3, and 1, educators feel that students are not being adequately taught to think creatively, develop personal skills and be adaptive. Similar to

students, as shown on the right side of the diagonal line in Figure 1, educators find that most items should occur more frequently than they now do. The left side of the diagonal line, however, indicates that there are a few items (37, 31, and 33) that ought to occur less than they do right now. For instance, item 37 ("Universities should/do aspire to enhance their position on global rankings") should decrease by nearly one whole point. Although the overall purpose fulfilment t-test indicates a necessity for improvement, educators acknowledge that certain aspects of university education are already spot on. Figure 1 shows that item 19 ("Educators should/do aim to instill factual knowledge and skills in their students") is positioned precisely on the diagonal line, showing that it is fulfilling its purpose. The same is nearly true for item 26 ("Educators should/do aim to not impose a strong political direction in the classroom").

Comparing Student and Educator Perspectives

Table 3

Independent Sample t-test between Difference Students and Educators

	t-test	Two-Sided p value
Overall Purpose Fulfilment Gap	t(74) = .10	p = .92

After examining students and educators separately, the question about how they compare remains. To answer the question 'What is the difference between purpose adherence scores between students and educators?', an independent sample t-test was conducted using the overall purpose fulfilment gap scores for both groups. Results indicated no significant difference between students and educators, t(74) = .10, p = .92.

Upon examining Figure 3, it becomes evident that, although there is no significant overall difference between students and educators, notable differences emerge upon closer

inspection. However, Figure 3 also reveals that for many items, students and educators agree on which direction change is wanted, differing only in the extent. One of the exceptions to this is item 33 ("Universities should/do aim to make society more productive") has the lowest level of consensus across students and educators. Educators believe this should happen less, while students think it should happen slightly more (Figure 3). The item with the largest difference between students and educators while agreeing on the direction of change is item 15 ("Students should/are taught to prioritise education over other interests"). Furthermore, the items where one group has the belief that something should occur less frequently, while the other group holds the belief that it should occur more frequently are interesting. While item 33 serves as an extreme illustration, a comparable trend can be seen in item 26 ("Educators should strive to avoid imposing a pronounced political bias in the classroom"). Here, educators perceive that this occurrence is not taking place, but students believe it should occur to a much greater extent. Similarly, in item 19 ("Educators should/do aim to instill factual knowledge and skills in their students"), educators view their performance as satisfactory, but students perceive a need for greater emphasis on this aspect. Despite these differences, Figure 3 also highlights four items where students and educators are in almost complete agreement. These include items 2, 1, and 10 ("Students should be/are taught to: discover their interests (2); be more adaptive to a changing environment (1); develop personal ethics (10)") and item 25 ("Educators should/do aim to be an authority figure").

Figure 3

The Difference between Item Purpose Fulfilment Gaps; Students and Educators
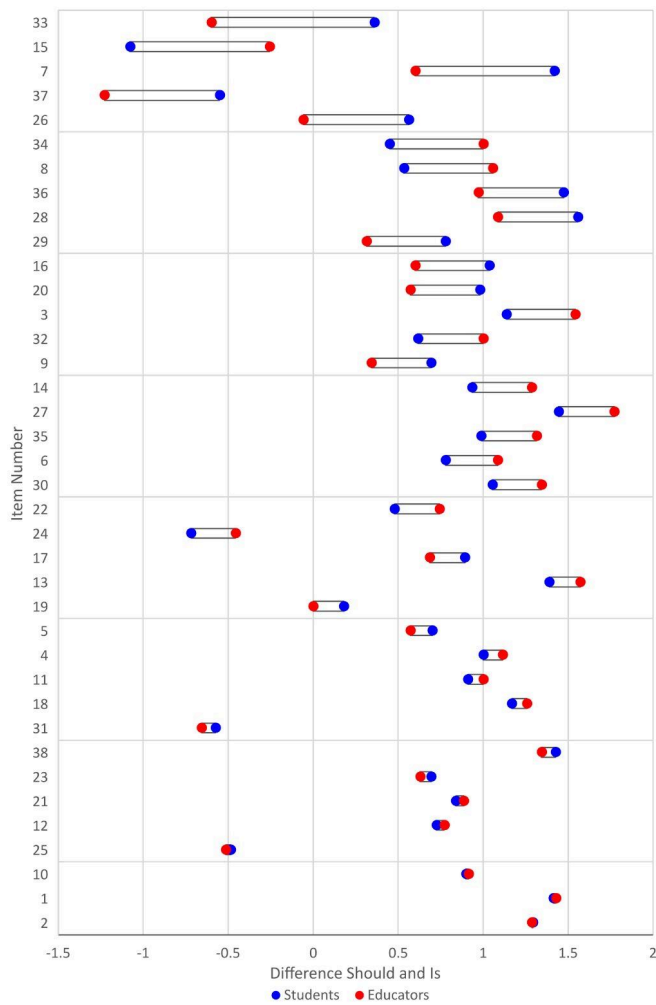
Note. In this plot, the mean scores of an items difference between 'should' and 'is' score is displayed for students and educators. The blue dots represent students, and the red dots represent educators. The stripes between the dots represent the difference between students and educators.

Discussion

This study explored to what extent university education fulfils its perceived purpose, identifying gaps between expected and actual performance, and comparing student and educator perspectives. The study found a moderate gap between the perceived purposes of university education and the fulfilment of these purposes, for both students and educators. This indicates that students and educators have identified several areas where university education is not meeting its expected purpose. Despite these gaps, there was no significant difference between the overall purpose fulfilment scores of students and educators, indicating a general consensus on the performance of university education.

The items with the largest purpose fulfilment gap for students included topics like practical courses, support in times of crisis and their needs, career preparation and inclusivity. For students, these topics were attitudes towards university education (Watty, 2006). They were aspects that students found should be occurring more than they currently are. For some items, the reverse was also true. On topics like prioritising education over hobbies, prioritising gifted students, improving global rankings and educators acting as authority figures, students found that these topics were occurring more than they should. For students, the topics on which the purpose of university education was most accurately fulfilled were making society more productive, and learning factual knowledge and skills. Educators felt that university education fell short in being inclusive, teaching students to think creatively, developing personal skills and being adaptive to a changing environment. As for students, there were some areas in which educators found an item should be less emphasised, like improving global rankings, prioritising gifted students, making society more productive, prioritising education over other interests for students and educators, and educators being an authority figure. For educators, university education was fulfilling its purpose of instilling factual knowledge and skills, and educators not imposing a strong political direction. Some of these

areas warrant that university education could better meet stakeholders' expectations.

It is interesting that students and educators mostly agreed on the areas needing improvement. Out of the 38 items, there were only 3 items where students and educators felt change should go in a different direction. This is a positive finding, because this consensus suggests that both groups would likely support similar changes in university education. This could mean that when changing curricula or systems, both educators and students would probably support this. If both groups support the same changes, this could mean implementations or reforms will be facilitated more smoothly.

The moderate purpose fulfilment gap highlights the need for university education to reassess and potentially prioritise different aspects of its education and support systems. While students emphasise education meeting their needs, educators stress inclusivity. Aligning the priorities of students and educators with university education can lead to more effective and satisfactory educational experiences. In contrast, university education instilling factual knowledge and skills was an area where both students and educators felt universities performed well, indicating it needs the least to no change.

So what do these findings mean? Why do students and educators think that change is necessary? One of the things that could help explain the findings is the article 'Things could be better' by Mastroianni & Ludwin-Peery (2022). In their article, they run multiple studies and find that when people are asked to imagine how things could be different, they almost always imagine how things could be better. Perhaps, by asking participants how things should be, we encouraged them to think of how things could be better. This could indicate that the findings we found might be biased, as asking what needs change in the first place might have primed participants to provide a stronger answer. However, this seems unlikely. If all items had shown similar purpose fulfilment gaps, such a bias would be more plausible. Instead, we observed that some items were already fulfilling their intended purpose quite well. If priming

had a significant impact, it is unclear why we did not observe a more consistent need for improvement across all items. Watty (2006) deduces that the difference between educator's beliefs and attitudes might be due to a lack of engagement with university systems and a mistrust of managing positions. Perhaps the fact that both stakeholders find that things should change indicates that perhaps they do not feel engaged in the institution that is the university. Do educators and students believe that they have any influence on the policies and curricula that university education provides? Or do they think that studying and working at a university do not mean you are part of the institution? In their paper about reforming universities, Halffman en Radder (2015) also mention that university staff and students could help university education identify its public duties. They advocate that stakeholders have a voice that can decide on matters they 'know best'.

In this study, we found no significant difference when comparing average purpose fulfilment between students and educators. When we took a closer look at the items, we even saw that they mostly agreed on the directions in which things needed to change. When there are differences between groups, this can have various effects. For example, according to Kite & Whitley (2016) this could lead to one group feeling superior and maintaining clear boundaries between groups. In other words, differences between groups can lead to an 'us vs. them' perspective. The common ingroup identity model (Dovidio et al., 2007) also states that groups with similar identities can be recategorized as one inclusive entity, a 'we'. For our findings, this could mean that when the time comes to initiate change in university education, students and educators could present as one front to make a stronger statement.

In conclusion, this study shows a moderate gap between the perceived purposes and the extent to which university education fulfils them, as identified by both students and educators. Despite this gap, there is a significant level of agreement between these two groups on the areas needing improvement, such as the need for more practical courses, better support

during crises, enhanced career preparation, and increased inclusivity. This consensus suggests a strong potential for collaborative efforts in implementing changes, as both students and educators would likely support similar reforms. The findings indicate that while universities are successfully imparting factual knowledge and skills, they fall short in areas like inclusivity and personal skill development. Addressing these gaps requires reassessing and prioritizing different aspects of education and support systems to better align with the needs of both students and educators. The overall agreement on the direction of necessary changes underscores the potential for unified efforts in improving the university experience, fostering a more inclusive and supportive educational environment. Moreover, the literature suggests that the identified gaps may reflect a broader issue of engagement and influence within the university system (Chan, 2016; Watty, 2004). Encouraging greater participation from students and educators in decision-making processes could help address these gaps more effectively, as they bring valuable perspectives and insights. Ultimately, by aligning the priorities of both groups, universities can create more effective and satisfactory educational experiences, fostering a stronger sense of community and shared purpose.

Despite the interesting findings, this study does have some limitations. First of all, the main part of the questionnaire, questions pertaining should and is, was self-developed and therefore not a validated instrument. This could potentially have affected the reliability of the results. The questions were based on a mix of educational philosophies and personal opinions and experiences, indicating the questions asked could be biased. Next to the questionnaire, one of the limitations was the sample group. Although the questionnaire was spread as widely as possible, most of the participants ended up being Dutch, involved in the psychology programme, and most likely linked to the University of Groningen. In other words, our sample is probably made up of mostly Western, Educated, Industrialized, Rich and Democratic participants (WEIRD, Henrich et al., 2010). This means our results might not be

generalizable to people studying in other programmes or of different nationalities. Henrich et al. (2010) argue that most people in the world are not WEIRD, and a WEIRD sample consists probably of some of the most psychologically unusual people. This could mean that other studies might have students who value other things, similarly, other nationalities or cultures could value other things as well. Besides this, the sample size for the educators was quite small (N = 35). This could mean that a larger sample size might have yielded different results.

To address the limitations of the current study, future research is highly encouraged to build upon these findings. Besides the purpose fulfilment gap, there are no other known frameworks for understanding the purpose of university education, according to stakeholders. To address the identified limitations, future studies should adopt a more research-based approach to questionnaire development, ensuring the use of validated instruments. Additionally, employing qualitative methods such as interviews or focus groups could provide deeper insights and a richer understanding of perceived purposes and purpose adherence. Including participants from a broader range of disciplines and nationalities is crucial for improving the generalizability of the findings. This would broaden insights about how purpose fulfilment is viewed by different cultural or societal groups. Moreover, longitudinal studies could be particularly valuable. Tracking purpose fulfilment gaps and perceived purposes over time—from the first year of study to graduation—would offer insights into how these perceptions evolve. This approach would help identify key stages where interventions could be most effective. Taking it a step further, intervention studies could be implemented to evaluate specific strategies aimed at reducing the purpose fulfilment gap. However, before these interventions are put into practice, additional explanatory studies are necessary to pinpoint the most promising areas for intervention. These studies would lay the groundwork for designing targeted interventions that address the specific needs and expectations of students and educators.

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Appendices

Appendix A, Demographics Students

Table 4

Nationality Students

Nationality	Frequency	Percent
Dutch	80	47.9
German	44	26.3
Romanian	8	4.8
Slovenian	4	2.4
Bulgarian	2	1.2
Chinese	2	1.2
Finnish	2	1.2
Hungarian	2	1.2
Indian	2	1.2
Irish	2	1.2
Italian	2	1.2
Spanish	2	1.2
Dual Nationality	2	1.2
Austrian	1	.6
British	1	.6
Canadaian	1	.6
Czech	1	.6
Greek	1	.6
Japanese	1	.6
Lithuanian	1	.6
Luxembourgish	1	.6
Polish	1	.6
Slovak	1	.6

Swedish	1	.6
Turkish	1	.6
Prefer not to say	1	.6
Total	167	100

Table 5

Education Level Students

Education Level	Frequency	Percent
Bachelor	147	88.0
Master	13	7.8
PhD	6	3.6
Graduate	1	0.6
Total	167	100

Table 6

Study Programme Students

Programme	Frequency	Percent
Psychology	108	64.7
Pedagogy and Educational Sciences	11	6.6
International Business	5	3.0
Law	4	2.4
Liberal Arts and Sciences	4	2.4
Computer Science	3	1.8
Prefer not to say	3	1.8
Biology	2	1.2
Media Studies	2	1.2
Physics	2	1.2

Research Master BSS	2	1.2
Arts (painting)	1	.6
Arts, Culture and Media	1	.6
Astronomy	1	.6
Business	1	.6
Clinical Neuropsychology	1	.6
Communication	1	.6
Cultural Anthropology	1	.6
Econometrics	1	.6
Environmental Science	1	.6
Interdiciplinary Social Science	1	.6
International and European Law	1	.6
International Relations	1	.6
International Teacher Education	1	.6
Literary Studies	1	.6
Neurosciences	1	.6
Physiotherapy	1	.6
Politics	1	.6
Psychobiology	1	.6
Science Communication	1	.6
Science Education	1	.6
Sociology	1	.6
Total	167	100

Table 7

Study year

Study year	Frequency	Percent
1st year	60	35.9
2nd year	34	20.4
3rd year	58	34.7
4th year	12	7.2
5th year	1	.6
Graduate	1	.6
Prefer not to say	1	.6
Total	167	100

Appendix B, Demographics Educators

Table 8

Nationality Educators

Nationality	Frequency	Percent
Dutch	15	42.9
German	4	11.4
Prefer not to say	4	11.4
Italian	3	8.6
Brazilian	1	2.9
British	1	2.9
Canadian	1	2.9
Finnish	1	2.9
French	1	2.9
Maltese	1	2.9
Serbian	1	2.9
U.S.	1	2.9
Total	35	100

Table 9

Job Title

Job Title	Frequency	Percent
Assistent Professor	13	37.1
Associate Professor	6	17.1
Bachelor Student	1	2.9
Full Professor	4	11.4
Lecturer	6	17.1
PhD Student	4	11.4

Trainer	1	2.9
Total	35	100

Table 10

Educating Programme

Programme	Frequency	Percent
Psychology	23	65.7
Economics and Business	2	5.7
Medicine	2	5.7
Philosophy	2	5.7
Prefer not to say	2	5.7
Artificial Intelligence	1	2.9
Communication	1	2.9
Mathematics	1	2.9
Pedagogy and Educational Sciences	1	2.9
Total	35	100

Appendix C, Item Numbers

Table 11

Items in Should and Is Questions

Item number	Item in questionnaire
1	Be more adaptive to a changing environment
2	Discover their interests
3	Develop personal skills (e.g., self-awareness, resilience, independence)
4	Develop social skills (e.g., communication, empathy)
5	Develop professional skills (e.g., teamwork, planning)
6	Shape their identity
7	Prepare for their career (e.g., make a LinkedIn profile, wrote professional emails)
8	Learn critical thinking skills
9	Expand personal network
10	Develop personal ethics
11	Contemplate societal issues
12	Develop professional ethics
13	Think creatively
14	Cultivate a sense of personal responsibility (e.g., be proactive, accountable)
15	Prioritize education over other interests
16	Create a space where everyone's opinions are heard
17	Create an interactive classroom environment
18	Learn from students
19	Instill factual knowledge and skills onto their students
20	Instill applicable knowledge and skills onto their students
21	Teach about societal problems
22	Foster rapports with fellow university personnel

23	Foster rapport with students
24	Prioritize education over other interests
25	Be an authority figure
26	Not impose a strong political direction in the classroom
27	Provide a studying environment in which students of various backgrounds can be succesful
28	Adapt to students' needs (e.g., physical and/or mental disabilities, sudden injury)
29	Prepare people for jobs most needed in society
30	Share knowledge across different cultural groups
31	Prioritize educating gifted students
32	Expand the knowledge of humankind
33	Make society more productive
34	Develop global citizenship trough its students
35	Develop a culture of lifelong learning
36	Include practical courses that resemble real life education programs
37	Improve its status on global rankings
38	Offer support to students, staff, etc., in times of crisis

Appendix D, Questionnaire Instrument

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

o   I consent (1)

o   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?

o   Educator (1)

o   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?

o   Male (1)

o   Female (2)

o   Non-binary (3)

o   Other (please specify) (4) _____

o   Prefer not to say (5)

Q5 What is your nationality?

o   Dutch (1)

o   Other (please specify) (2) _____

Display This Question: If Q2 = Student

Q6 Which level of education do you currently follow?

o   Bachelor (1)

o   Master (2)

o   PhD (3)

o   Already graduated from RUG (4)

o   Other (please specify) (5) _____

Display This Question: If Q2 = Student

Q7 What program do you currently follow?

o   Psychology (1)

o   Sociology (2)

o   Pedagogy and Educational Sciences (3)

o   Other (please specify) (4) _____

Display This Question: If Q2 = Student

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

o   1st year (1)

o   2nd year (2)

o   3rd year (3)

o   4th year (4)

o   Other (please specify) (5) _____

Display This Question: If Q2 = Educator

Q9 What program do you mainly teach in?

o   Psychology (1)

o   Sociology (2)

o   Pedagogy and Educational Sciences (3)

o   Other (please specify) (4) _____

Display This Question: If Q2 = Educator

Q10 What is your job title at your institution?

o   PhD Student (1)

o   Lecturer (2)

o   Assistant Professor (3)

o   Adjunct Professor (5)

o   Full Professor (6)

o   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.

o   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)										
Instil factual knowledge and skills onto their students (4)										
Instil 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?

o 6 or lower (1)

o 6-7 (2)

o 7-8 (3)

o 8-9 (4)

o 9 or higher (5)

o 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.

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

o   Yes, I would like to participate (fill in your email address below) (2) _____

End of Block: Block 22