Sheffield Hallam University

Editorial

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Editorial

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There have been many colleagues who have pointed out that over the last decades, higher education and the outcomes it achieves have become more important for modern societies (e.g. Chou, Jungblut, Ravinet, & Vukasovic, 2017; Gornitzka & Maassen, 2022). Research conducted in universities helps to address societies' grand challenges, innovations produced in the sector are of key importance for modern knowledge economies and, maybe most importantly, increasing numbers of people are attending higher education to educate themselves and develop relevant skills and knowledge for their future life and for their role in society. This special issue focuses on the latter aspect of this development.

Globally, working age populations are increasingly better qualified. Worldwide the share of young people in tertiary education has steadily increased leading to many higher education systems becoming massified (Frank & Meyer, 2020; Marginson, 2016; Trow, 2006); a growth which suggests a trend towards ever better qualified workforces in the future. However, there are many uncertainties that might challenge this optimistic outlook. Shifts in labor market needs due to, e.g., rapid digital transformation of work or the rise of AI, create adaptation pressures for higher education sectors around the globe. In short, universities are required to ensure that the skills and knowledge taught in study programs today will still be relevant in tomorrow's labor market (O'Dea, 2024).

Moreover, increased geopolitical tensions, and the resulting tightening of visa regimes and limits to mobility, create conditions that potentially limit how well future graduates can use their skills and qualifications in a global labor market. Finally, fundamental inequalities continue to stratify labor market destinations leading to differences in how well tertiary education meets its promise of better career and life prospects for all who participate in it (O'Shea, 2023). These trends potentially challenge the assumption that most tertiary graduates can assume that they will secure high-skill careers based upon a

successful higher education career. However, evidence from predominantly (Western) high-income countries suggests so far a continued positive effect of attaining higher education for both GDP growth and educational development (Li, Xue, Wei, & He, 2024).

This Special Issue brings together international scholarship to examine and compare trends in graduate labor market destinations in the wake of the mass expansion of higher education systems. In doing so, it advocates for a robust, evidence-based inquiry into the extrinsic outcomes of higher education, with particular attention to the stratification of these outcomes across diverse demographic and socioeconomic groups. It does so with a global view the goes beyond the common focus on Western Europe or North America.

We have selected this issue in recognition that graduates are maybe the most important contribution of higher education to society. Whilst we recognize that increasing shares of young (and older) people are attaining a higher education qualification, the increasing uncertainty in global job markets combined with increasing graduate numbers creates a significant challenge for the sector. This evolving situation demands further reflection and creative solutions to ensure as a sector, we are not 'failing' our graduates, particularly those from diverse backgrounds. We hope that the contributions in this issue provide a starting point for further investigations into this complex and highly relevant topic.

Finally, this special issue also marks a shift in the editorial team. With this issue Sarah and Jens hand over the role of special issues editors to Kate and Ming. For the outgoing special issue editors, it has been a pleasure and a privilege to work for Studies in Higher Education in the last years. We want to thank all our colleagues in the team of editors, the staff at SRHE, and the staff at Taylor & Francis for the great collaboration. We hope the special issues we selected and accompanied through the editorial process were timely and intellectually stimulating for our readers, and we wish the incoming special issue editors all the best for their mandate.

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