What Types of Aims Are Out There in a Higher Education System: A Narrative Review

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Abstract

Background: Higher education plays a crucial role in economic, social, and cultural development, but it is facing a range of challenges, including globalization, highly competitive world, as well as the rapid development and application of technology. These challenges also arise and affect the health sector. It is essential to address the aims of education, as not only it reflects the cultural, social, and political philosophy of a country but also express the most important values that govern that society.

Objectives: The main objective of this study is to identify and categorize the types of aims mentioned for the higher educational systems and explore their significance as well as the existing approaches used to determine aims within the higher education system.

Methods: A narrative review was used to examine the available evidence on the aims of education. The study's objectives were divided into several sections to address following questions: a) What are the various types of educational aims? b) In what ways are aims demonstrated or realized within the realm of higher education? c) What is the connection between aims and the educational objectives in contemporary education systems? In this regard, we examined research papers and the governmental documents of educational systems.

Results: The aims of higher education could be categorized into four key areas: intellectual achievement, individual growth and development, social growth and socialization, and economic competition.

Conclusion: To thrive in the third millennium, it is imperative for higher education systems to establish clear and transparent aims that can effectively address the challenges they currently face. Thus, it is crucial to comprehend the relationship between these concepts and factors, and define a desired aim based on local values in every education system.

Keywords: Education; Aims; Goals; Objective; Higher Education

Background

The purpose of education is empowering individuals to analyze and solve problems, through the acquisition and effective management of knowledge.

At a higher level the term "aim" can be broadly understood as "desired meaning," "end," or "goal." However, this definition emphasizes a crucial distinction: the aim refers to the intended outcome, not the underlying purpose or rationale (1, 2). Education provides the pathway to achieving these intended outcomes. It involves mastering skills, effectively managing knowledge, analyzing problems, and deepening one's understanding of ideas, ultimately leading to enhanced experiences and profound freedom (3).

In the field of education, "aim" refers to the articulation of prescriptive statements that outline the intended outcomes for learners upon the completion of the educational process. The effectiveness and desirability of these statements are dependent on the aims that are defined for them (4).

The ultimate aim is to articulate goals for individuals and society as a whole, while general goals are more immediate and qualitative in nature. Objectives, on the other hand, are expressed in a clear, precise, and often

quantitative manner (aim-goal-objective). Aims typically determine general and objective goals and serve as the foundation for establishing educational strategies and related programs (5, 6).

Throughout human civilization, philosophers, thinkers, and scholars have held diverse viewpoints on the ideals and aims of education. However, they unanimously agree that the ultimate outcome of education should involve the transmission and cultivation of virtue (7-9).

On the one hand, education promotes the individual, nurturing their inner world and facilitating the growth as well as realization of moral values, spiritual awareness, self-discovery, inner freedom, intellectual acuity, aesthetics, and the enhancement of personal relationships. It also enhances cognitive abilities, empathy, capabilities, and practical skills. On the other hand, education enhances individuals' interaction with the world they inhabit, encompassing both the natural environment and human society (10-14).

The determination and selection of aims within the value framework that governs the education system hold significant meaning and are influenced by the specific perspectives on human beings. As such, the description of human beings and their characteristics within a system serve as guiding principles for researchers in defining educational aims, goals, foundations, principles, and methodologies within that particular system (9, 13-15).

The aims of education can be viewed from two perspectives. First, they can be seen as transcendental goals that hold value regardless of specific time periods, cultures, or social norms throughout history. Secondly, they can be shaped by the societal assumptions of a particular group, place, and time, reflecting specific social or cultural values. However, it is important to note that the determination and articulation of educational aims should align with the prevailing human values within a society (16, 17).

When we talk about the aims of the education system, we are referring to those that empower, regulate, and provide guidance to the education system (18-20).

In the modern world, where there are immense pressures for policy changes in all dimensions of education systems, it becomes increasingly crucial to develop a goal-setting model to address an unknown future. It is widely acknowledged by philosophers, experts, and policymakers that the direction, progress, and development of education systems rely on the determination and formulation of their aims. However, there is still limited consensus on a set of new aims that align with the skills and competencies required in the 21st century due to the varying values that govern societies (9, 21-24).

It is also essential to interpret and promote the aims of education in alignment with the values that prevail in society. Challenges such as globalization of markets, technological advancements, and intensified international competition have led to higher expectations and demands placed on the educational system (25, 26).

To address this challenge, higher education systems need to move away from educational curricula that are solely focused on objective goals, standardized approaches, and uniform evaluations to the development of aims (27). The development of aims in higher education typically aligns with the goal-setting model established by the Ministry of Education in each country. This review study was conducted to define the concept of aims in the higher education system and explore their significance as well as the existing approaches used to determine aims within the higher education system (28).

Objectives

This review study was conducted to define and categorize the concept of aims in the higher education system and explore their significance as well as the existing approaches used to determine aims within the higher education system.

The research questions include: a) What are the various types of educational aims? b) In what ways are aims demonstrated or realized within the realm of higher education? c) What is the connection between aims and the educational objectives in contemporary education systems?

Methods

This narrative review study investigated the existing evidence on the aims of education within the higher education system.

Study Selection: To access relevant resources within Iran, the researchers conducted searches in the SID and Magiran databases using keywords such as aim, general goal, objective goal, mission, education system, and higher education system. Additionally, individual or mixed searches were conducted in various international databases, including Google Scholar, PubMed, Scopus, ProQuest, Ovid, and ScienceDirect using keywords such as aim, goal, objective, mission, and higher education.

The inclusion criteria were both quantitative and qualitative studies, books, and documents that were relevant to the research question. The timeframe for examining governance documents was set from 2000 to 2023, while other sources were not limited to a specific time period.

Study Sample: The study sample consisted of 100 documents, including government documents, philosophical books, and related articles, relevant to the research question. Both quantitative and qualitative studies, books, and documents were considered.

Data Collection: Relevant resources were identified through searches in Iranian databases (SID, Magiran) and international databases (Google Scholar, PubMed, Scopus, ProQuest, Ovid, ScienceDirect). Keywords used included aim, general goal, objective goal, mission, education system, and higher education. The search timeframe for governance documents was 2000-2023; no date restriction applied to other sources

Data Analysis: The 100 selected documents were examined to identify key themes and patterns related to the aims of higher education. A narrative synthesis approach was employed to synthesize and interpret findings, providing a comprehensive overview of the research topic.

Note that in many countries, higher education operates as a subset of the Ministry of Education and is not inherently independent. In cases where higher education institutions are independent, they typically follow the pattern of determining and formulating educational aims, which is usually established at the highest level of policy-making within the respective country. However, in Iran, higher education is regulated by two governing bodies: Ministry of Health, Medical Education and Treatment, plus the Ministry of Science. As a result, the discussion of aims in higher education in Iran includes the health-related higher education system as well.

Results

The findings of the reviewed studies were categorized according to the research objectives and were presented in several sections to address the following questions: a) What are the main characteristics of the various types of educational aims? b) How do society's aims influence the development of its values? c) In what ways are aims demonstrated or realized within the realm of higher education? d) How is the connection between aims and the educational curriculum (or the operation of the education system) established in contemporary education systems? (Table 1).

Table 1. Key Research Questions and Findings

Research Question	Key Findings (Summary Statement with References)
A) What are the main characteristics of the various types of educational aims?	-Historical Shift: (29) -Generality & Ambiguity: (8) -Democratic Societies aims: (12, 30) -Categorization of Aims: (18, 31, 32) -Specific Aims: (33-41) -Influence on Prioritization: (8, 42)
B) How do society's aims influence the development of its values?	-Education's Role in Value Development: (33, 43) -Interplay of Aims and Values: (18, 44) -Values as Transcendent Goods) (18, 44) -Approaches to Integrating Values (7) -Cultural Aims and Education: (21) -Prioritizing Cultural Values: (19, 45)
C) In what ways are aims demonstrated or realized within the realm of higher education?	-Global Role & University Functions: (9, 46) -Diverging Aims & Formulation:(47) -Historical Views & "Idea of University(47, 48) -Core Concepts & Common Ground:(21, 49-53)
D) How is the connection between aims and the educational curriculum (or the operation of the education system) established in contemporary education systems?	-Influence of Context & Need for Reevaluation: (54) -Prioritizing Aims & Modern Considerations: (44, 62) -Curriculum Alignment & Challenges: (20)

A) What are the various types of educational aims?

In the past, the aim of education was to transfer wisdom and cultivate virtue, whereas modern educational institutions primarily focus on subject-based learning. The decline of the aim of acquiring wisdom and its replacement with textbook knowledge is one of the factors contributing to the ineffectiveness of education systems (29).

In most countries worldwide, aims are often articulated generally in the education systems. John White highlights that the aims of the education system in the U.K span only about twelve lines. This brevity of articulating aims, considering the significant responsibility bestowed upon educational institutions as representatives of the system, is insignificant, illogical, and ambiguous. Moreover, these documented aims do not fully apply to higher education institutions (8).

When exploring the education systems of democratic societies, two common aims frequently arise: equipping learners for active participation in democratic life, and preparing educated citizens (30-55).

The aims of education can be categorized as either intrinsic, focusing on lifelong learning, knowledge and skill development, and understanding for both individuals and society, or instrumental, aiming to prepare young individuals for work and the national economy. These aims may emphasize the development of individual characteristics or capacities, promotion of citizenship and social cohesion, or the preservation of cultural heritage (19, 32).

The aims of education systems can be understood at either the individual or community level, manifested either openly or covertly, and rooted in specific values or interests. Upon reviewing governance texts and documents, several aims have been identified, including lifelong learning, logical and critical thinking, autonomy, moral integrity, creativity, innovation, independence, self-flourish for individuals and society, democracy, adaptability to changes, equal opportunities, nationalism, international unity, social justice, belief in God, national unity, freedom, transparency, economic growth, and sustainable development (21, 33-39, 53).

Liberals highlight the significance of education as an individual good with intrinsic value, while socialists perceive education as a means of social and practical good or as conflicting with intrinsic value. Applied aims of education are further categorized as professional or social. These aims are not necessarily contradictory as long as their position is defined. For instance, an individual can be educated to become autonomous or independent, which is an intrinsic good, while also being educated as a responsible citizen and productive member of society. Ultimately, the prioritization of aims is influenced by prevailing attitudes, values, and policies. Policymakers, philosophers, and researchers often align the aims of education to support their own perspectives (8, 42).

B) How do society's aims influence the development of its values?

Education should reflect enduring values that contribute to the formulation and pursuit of aims. These values encompass individual, social, and family values. Additionally, the cultivation of virtues such as truth, justice, honesty, trust, and a sense of duty should be regarded as fundamental educational values. The belief that education serves as a pathway to foster spiritual, moral, social, cultural, physical, and mental growth, thereby promoting individual well-being. It also facilitates the establishment of equal opportunities, a robust and fair democracy, a prosperous economy, and sustainable development (33, 43).

The relationship between educational aims and societal values is complex. Aims are influenced by prevailing norms and values, while education also serves to reflect and reinforce these values, contributing to the formation of the desired societal model. Thus, identifying shared values that underpin education is crucial, though the process itself can be challenging. Scholarly debate exists regarding the nature of this relationship, with some arguing values are defined by evolving societal goals, while others posit intrinsic, independent values that should guide educational aims (18).

Sometimes, the aims of education are viewed as transcendent goods that are linked to values that are not dependent on specific cultural or social norms. In this perspective, the pursuit of knowledge, intellectual growth, or moral character is considered as a shared interest. However, if the values promoted in education are in conflict with an individual's society or cultural group, it may lead to a sense of detachment or alienation from their society or culture (7, 18, 44).

Cultural aims represent the values that all nations strive to transmit and perpetuate within their societies. In simpler societies, cultural values may be informally transferred through daily interactions, while in contemporary advanced and pluralistic societies, specific mechanisms are required for this purpose. Education systems and institutions serve as the primary platforms for presenting and transmitting cultural values. Through the formulation and articulation of aims, these systems primarily foster knowledge, skills, and attitudes that align with cultural values. This process is commonly known as an educational curriculum and is followed within education systems (20).

The extensive dissemination of cultural values contradicts the limited capacity of educational institutions, making it unrealistic to expect these institutions to transmit every aspect of societal culture. Prioritizing values becomes crucial in this context. Upon examining governance documents, it becomes evident that education systems employ criteria to select cultural values for inclusion in their structures. These criteria not only avoid unethical instances such as racial discrimination and racism but also ensure alignment

with governmental or political values. Some researchers argue that this approach can overlook moral significance or social responsibility (19, 43).

C) In what ways are aims demonstrated or realized within the realm of higher education?

The philosophy of higher education embraces a global perspective that acknowledges the potential for investigating and researching any subject, making it possible to observe the entirety of the world within the university setting. This perspective forms an integral part of the essence of the university. Universities and other institutions of higher education hold significance not only in terms of training skilled professionals but also in expanding the frontiers of knowledge, fostering personal growth, promoting community development, and facilitating global competition (9, 45).

Barnett explored the aims of higher education, contrasting policymaker and philosopher perspectives. Policymakers prioritize practical, market-oriented aims focused on human resource development, global competitiveness, and market demands. Philosophers, conversely, take a more holistic view, considering the full range of human experience—thoughts, emotions, and aspirations—in formulating educational aims (55).

This difference in perspective is reflected in how aims are conceptualized. In higher education, a common approach is to formulate aims for specific courses or related subjects, outlining a particular path. In contrast, a broader conceptual approach encompasses the entire field of education (55).

The endeavor to define the aims of higher education is not a novel concept. Whitehead considered the role of "universities and their performance," and advocated that the proper functioning of a university should be grounded in the aim of creative and imaginative acquisition of knowledge (48).

Gasset asserted that the mission of the university was to provide students with a comprehensive exposure to modern culture through the provision of a dynamic and living system of ideas across courses (49). In his analysis of articles published over the past 150 years, Barnett drew a distinction between the aims and the idea of higher education. He observed that authors of articles pertaining to the "idea of higher education" often amalgamated their perspectives on the aims of higher education with the concept itself (55).

The idea of the university revolves around an educational process where knowledge itself is considered the ultimate aim. Newman put forth a viewpoint that defines university education not in terms of acquiring specific types of knowledge or professional competence, but rather as fostering the overall development and higher order. The realization and development of these capacities will enable learners to derive benefits beyond the university setting and effectively navigate real-world circumstances (46, 50, 55).

Similarly, John Stuart Mill argues that the university is not solely a place for professional education. Students should first learn to be well-rounded individuals before becoming lawyers, doctors, or practitioners in any field. The university should imbue professionals with the guidance to apply their specialized knowledge within the framework of values and the broader public culture (51).

While the various concepts of aims in higher education may differ in their articulation, they share a common characteristic: their value primarily stems from the future benefits they offer to society and learners. In essence, learners should be equipped with the capacity and capability to express themselves beyond the confines of a purely scientific curriculum. This implies that the aim of education in higher education institutions is the holistic and comprehensive development of learners, enabling them to navigate the complexities, uncertainties, and realities of life and society.

D) How is the connection between aims and the educational curriculum (or the operation of the education system) established in contemporary education systems?

Throughout different historical periods, the aims of education across various fields have been shaped by philosophical perspectives, specific disciplines, and governing policies. The shifting social structures, growing influence of globalization, reality of multiculturalism, pluralistic societies, and intense competition prevalent in all social and economic sectors necessitate a reevaluation of the university's role within the education system. Thus, the aim of education within the university should be defined as the establishment and development of a robust educational institution that enables learners to successfully integrate as individuals, professionals, and socially engaged members (53).

John White asserts that the education system should prioritize aims rather than focusing solely on the structure. Accordingly, the entire effort of the system

should be directed towards identifying and realizing national aims (35).

In the modern world, White identifies two scenarios for examining and formulating the aims of education:

1- The aims should be examined and formulated in light of factors such as increased life expectancy, the expansion of the Internet, shifts in work patterns, climate change, growing inequality, and the rise of populism. These factors profoundly impact how we think about education and shape our way of life in general.

2- The examination and formulation of educational aims should focus on equipping learners to lead fulfilling personal lives. Learners should be motivated to pursue meaningful work for its own sake and maintain a curiosity to explore new realms. Central to these aims is the concept of a fulfilling personal life, which encompasses the well-being of oneself and others (38).

While the inclusion of subjects in educational curriculum is ultimately justified by the aims of the education system itself, it does not necessarily guarantee that these curricula effectively align with those aims. For instance, learning and behavioral objectives may be tailored to post-graduation performance and vary across different curricula. While some aims of education hold relevance in a professional context, the most significant aims remain consistent across various curricula.

Although there exists a logical relationship between the aims of education and the educational curriculum, it is not always easy to formulate comprehensive or objective goals for the educational curriculum based solely on these overarching aims, since the aims may be implicitly expressed, or there may exist multiple ways to achieve them. Despite these challenges, it is imperative not to overlook the development of such valuable aims (19).

By examining the documentation of education systems, studies and researches, the key areas in which the aims of higher education have been reviewed and formulated are as follows (Table 2).

Table 2. Key areas of higher education Aims from Documentation and Research

Areas of Aims	Definition of Aims
Intellectual achievement	Preparing individuals with scientific knowledge and skills for societal roles (9, 30, 47)
Social growth and socialization	Preparing responsible citizens who embrace societal norms and values (9, 53-58)
Economic competition	Equipping learners with skills and knowledge for the global economy, making them effective workforce members (18, 59, 60)
Personal development and growth	Fostering self-flourishing, enhancing personal communication, clarifying personal values, developing effective communication skills (2, 8, 42, 61, 62)

Intellectual achievement: Aims in this domain are established based on scientific knowledge and skills to prepare individuals for their roles in society. There is a general consensus on these aims, as parents aspire for their children to attain high levels of competence which will enable them to secure good positions in society. Policymakers tend to excel in the global competition and ultimately realize an ideal society comprised of content and fulfilled individuals (9, 30, 55).

Social growth and socialization: This area focuses on preparing learners to become responsible citizens who embrace societal norms and values. This aspect holds particular significance for policymakers in any given society, as they emphasize the values upheld in their desired societal framework. These values include patriotism, obedience, honesty, cooperation, competitiveness, and moral responsibility. Furthermore, in line with the aims of education, learners should be encouraged to engage in social services or service learning, enabling them to reflect upon and respond to the needs and challenges of their society (9, 55-58).

Economic competition (social efficiency): The aims in this realm are based on equipping learners with the necessary skills and knowledge to thrive in the global economy, thereby transforming them into effective and efficient members of the workforce. Cultivating attitudes such as punctuality, cooperation, and adherence to rules are important considerations within this framework (18, 60, 63).

Personal development and growth: The aims in this domain are designed to foster students' self-flourish, enhance personal communication, clarify personal values, and develop effective communication skills (2, 8, 42, 62, 64).

Strengths and limitations: This study had strengths and limitations. One of its strengths is that no study has comprehensively examined all types of higher education system aims across programs and countries. However, since this study is a narrative review, it lacks the

coherence and structure of other types of review studies, such as systematic reviews.

Conclusion

Research indicates that education systems often prioritize political and governance interests, which can result in conflicts or incompatibilities among various aims and goals.

However, to achieve success in the third millennium, it is crucial to address the fundamental structure, nature, communication methods, and the distinctive role of aims, including general and objective goals.

The reviewed evidence regarding the education system, particularly higher education, and its relationship with the aims of education demonstrated that these aims were derived from the cultural, social, and political values of the society, thereby forming a set of values. It is essential for higher education institutions to clearly and transparently define their aims to overcome existing crises. Thus, it can be stated that as one of the applications of this study, the country's educational policymakers, by understanding the importance of aims in formulating educational policies and considering the impact of social and cultural values on these ends, can formulate policies that, in addition to being oriented in line with the desired values, also enjoy greater social acceptance.

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