

# Human flourishing: (Re-)integrating a Neglected Ideal into Higher Education

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**ABSTRACT**— *There is a rich, multidisciplinary (if not piecemeal) body of literature on human flourishing, amassed over the centuries, spanning philosophy, psychology, education, and the social sciences. Debates have centred on the nature and conceptualisation of flourishing, the personal and social conditions necessary for its realisation, its intrinsic composition, and its role in society. Although many approaches to flourishing exist, these converge on the view that flourishing is a generally positive phenomenon, with empirical evidence suggesting it is associated with a variety of individual and social benefits. This paper focuses on human flourishing specifically in the domain of higher education, where it currently receives little attention, arguing that flourishing is a worthwhile ideal to (re-)integrate into teaching, learning, and research practices as a means of helping to remedy some of the sector's key problems and to realise future goals. Thus, this paper does not seek to advocate a particular position on flourishing, but to present a series of arguments in support of developing a focused research agenda on flourishing in higher education. Using examples from both higher education in general and in Japan, I argue that (a) human flourishing is an ideal congruent with the purposes of higher education, (b) a greater focus on flourishing is likely to help address the high prevalence of mental health problems among those studying in higher education institutions, (c) higher education institutions are strategically well-placed domains for implementing initiatives aimed at enhancing flourishing because they contain concentrated numbers of at-risk individuals, and (d) the promotion of flourishing in higher education institutions is congruent with, and likely to be conducive to, changes the sector must undergo to remain socially relevant and useful in the future. The paper culminates in the proposal for the development of a focused research agenda, in Japan and internationally, on the phenomenon of flourishing as a useful means of enhancing higher education quality and its contributions to social and economic goals. Specific research areas are suggested and discussed with reference to benefits and potential challenges.*

**Keywords**— Human flourishing; Higher education; Mental health

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## 1. HUMAN FLOURISHING

Human flourishing is an elusive concept, notoriously difficult to describe, yet has been the subject of extensive debate across many disciplines. The term itself derives from the Latin *flor*, ‘flower,’ and, consistent with this, our colloquial usage of the word relates to ideas of growth, prosperity, positive development, and wellness. Academically, the concept has been positioned in a variety of ways, with both commonalities and important distinctions.

### 1.1. ‘Social’ approaches

Aristotle’s (350BC/2000) conception of eudaemonia, loosely translatable to ‘flourishing,’ forms the basis of most social science literature on human flourishing. Aristotle regarded eudaemonia as a form of *social* prosperity in which citizens could only flourish together, not merely as individuals. In order to flourish, citizens must act in accordance with their true nature, to act virtuously. Once all citizens fulfil their nature through virtuous conduct, a state of eudaemonia emerges (see also Anscombe, 1958; Younkins, 2008). Thus, in this view, flourishing is not so much an end in itself, but a ‘moral by-product’ (Elster, 1981) that appears in the process of citizens’ collective fulfilment of human nature.

The Aristotelian notion that we flourish as a collective, or as part of a greater whole, is reflected in contemporary sociological and anthropological approaches to human flourishing. Marx (1959/1988), for example, conceived of flourishing as a form of social ‘emancipation’ (from the adversities associated with socioeconomic inequality) which could be attained through the reduction of class disparities. Indeed, societies with greater economic equality are known to enjoy higher levels of general wellbeing (e.g. O’Connell, 2004). In addition to class equality, social approaches have also highlighted the importance of societal integration and cohesiveness (Durkheim, 1897/1951) and citizens’ participation in culturally meaningful social practices and a shared sense of community (viz. Turner, 1969/1995) as essential prerequisites for collective flourishing.

### 1.2. ‘Individual’ approaches

Approaches to flourishing within psychology and behavioural sciences tend to diverge from social approaches in their greater focus on flourishing *within* individuals rather than among them. This does not imply a denial of the necessity of social relationships for flourishing (in fact the opposite is the case; Keyes, 1998), but rather that the flourishing of an individual is *possible* without a strong dependence on the flourishing of the rest of society. These approaches also tend to position flourishing as a desirable end in its own right, borrowing from the utilitarian view that wellbeing may be pursued without great emphasis on the virtuousness of the means used to attain it (e.g. Bentham, 1776/1988). Approaches to psychology have, however, gone into greater detail in exploring the personal and environmental conditions that are conducive to flourishing, such as mental health (Keyes, 2002), engagement with life, a sense of meaning, positive emotions, and accomplishment (Seligman, 2011), optimism, life satisfaction, self-respect, and many other psychosocial factors (Diener et al., 2010). These ‘checkbox’ methods of conceptualising flourishing, in which a series of components must be present or conditions fulfilled, resemble earlier psychological constructs that overlap conceptually with flourishing, such as self-actualisation (Maslow, 1943), self-determination (Deci & Ryan, 1985), psychological wellbeing (Ryff, 1989), and ‘authentic happiness’ (Seligman, 2002).

### 1.3. The approach taken in this paper

Although I have summarised social and individual perspectives separately above, it should be noted that these views are complementary rather than contradictory, providing insights into diverse, inter-connected facets of human flourishing at both individual and societal levels. There also seems to be much scope for interdisciplinary cross-fertilisation (Rombs, 2014), and indeed some connections between social science and psychological approaches to flourishing have already been suggested (e.g. Haidt, Seder, & Kesebir, 2008). Thus, in this paper I do not seek to advocate a particular stance on human flourishing, but rather to argue for the development of a focused research agenda on a variety of aspects of flourishing that may be relevant to the enhancement of mental health, productivity, and general wellbeing within the domain of higher education.

## 2. WHY IN HIGHER EDUCATION?

I present four arguments in support of why higher education institutions may benefit from implementation of initiatives which cultivate both individual and social flourishing.

### 2.1. Flourishing is congruent with the purposes of higher education

The modern university has its roots in the formation of academic societies (or ‘guilds’), in Medieval Europe, which were legally recognised bodies acting as centres of teaching, learning, and scholarship (Colish, 1997). Although the guilds were largely autonomous, they soon came to be seen as potential ‘think tanks,’ or generators of important knowledge that could be used to address public problems and help realise social goals (Colish, 1997). Indeed, there appears to be some consensus that higher education does have a social purpose - to serve the public good - which is connected to, but necessarily supersedes, serving the individual needs of its members. Schwartz (2003), for example, points out that higher education institutions contribute to and enact social values through cultivating trained professionals. Thus, teachers enact education, lawyers and barristers enact social justice, and doctors enact health - values known to be conducive to flourishing in a societal sense (Diener et al., 2010; Durkheim, 1897/1951). Moreover, higher education institutions also *embody* social values by reflecting society - for example their admissions policies reflect whom we believe deserve the most advanced educational opportunities, while their curriculum, teaching methods, and assessments reflect what knowledge and abilities we deem to be relevant and worthwhile (Shapiro, 2009). In a sense, then, higher education is a model of the “...broad hopes and aspirations of...society itself” (Shapiro, 2009, p. 12) - an institution which has the potential to both contribute to and embody societal flourishing.

Yet more recently, the purpose of higher education has become unclear again. As the sector has become increasingly marketed in many countries (e.g. Slaughter & Rhoades, 2004), some governments have come to view higher education in primarily financial terms, as a mechanism to rehabilitate the economy - a task which, though important, should not necessarily constitute the sector’s main social missions (Schwartz, 2003; Slaughter & Rhoades, 2004). There also appear to be disparities in institutional versus student views on higher education’s purpose. Evidence from a review of 20 books, papers, and other publications suggests that while institutions view their purpose as being primarily social, students tend to hold a more individualistic stance, regarding higher education as a kind of means to personal ends (Chan, Brown, & Ludlow, 2014). Students who adopt such an instrumental approach, for example by prioritising short-term/‘shallow’ rewards (e.g. grades, passing) also fail to achieve as well as their peers who value longer-term/‘deep’ rewards (e.g. learning) (Entwistle & Peterson, 2004; Zimmerman, Bonner, & Kovach, 2006).

Flourishing - and indeed wellbeing in general - have recently been incorporated into educational activities in a variety of primary and secondary school settings (e.g. Seligman, 2008), suggesting that traditional educational goals such as learning can beneficially coexist with methods and activities aimed at enhancing flourishing at an individual level (Noddings, 2003). Indeed, there is considerable empirical evidence demonstrating that positive emotional experiences (e.g. joy, happiness) have an enabling effect on learning by encouraging curiosity and creative thinking (Fredrickson,

2004). Such learning then reinforces the positive emotions experiences, resulting in a ‘positive upward spiral’ of learning-by-flourishing and flourishing-by-learning (Fredrickson, 2004). Thus, the implementation of flourishing-oriented initiatives at higher education level seems likely to encourage students to engage in ‘deeper,’ non-instrumental learning, which in turn may reinforce positive experiences, setting into cycle the spiral and promoting students’ flourishing at an individual level.

## **2.2. Promoting flourishing can help address mental health issues in higher education**

Mental health in university student populations has been identified as a concerning public health issue in recent decades (Stallman, 2010; Stewart-Brown et al., 2000). University students are known to exhibit consistently higher prevalence rates of depression (Dyrbye, Thomas, & Shanafelt, 2006; Ibrahim, Kelly, Adams, & Glazebrook, 2013), anxiety (Dyrbye et al., 2006) and subsyndromal psychological distress (Stallman, 2010) than both the general population and age-matched peers. In a large Australian study, for example, 19% of 6,479 university students were found to have clinically significant levels of mental health problems, while 67% were estimated to suffer from subsyndromal levels of distress (Stallman, 2010). This trend is consistent with findings from other countries. Prevalence of a diagnosable depression or anxiety disorder among 2,843 public university students in the United States was 13% for postgraduates and 15% for undergraduates (Eisenberg, Gollust, Golberstein, & Hefner, 2007), while a UK study found university students fared significantly worse on both emotional and physical health measures compared with local age-matched peers (Stewart-Brown et al., 2000). A similar picture is observed in Japan, where a 116-student sample was found to exhibit a 20% prevalence rate for a major depressive episode at the time of the study, while 23% met the criteria for major depressive disorder during the 12 months preceding data collection (Tomoda, Mori, Kimura, & Takahashi, 2000). Japanese university students also tend to report significantly higher levels of anxiety (Iwata & Higuchi, 2000) and depression (Baron & Matsuyama, 1988) than their American counterparts.

Mental health problems in university students are associated with a variety of academic and other issues. Students suffering from depressive symptoms, for example, have impaired academic productivity and struggle with learning, memory, and academic performance (Hysenbegasi, Hass, & Rowland, 2005; Stallman, 2010) and are more likely to experience suicidal ideation (Garlow et al., 2008). Mental and emotional health problems tend to be associated with having or worrying about financial struggles (Eisenberg et al., 2007; Stewart-Brown et al., 2000) and work- and study-related problems (Stewart-Brown et al., 2000). Students are also more likely to suffer from psychological distress if they have a disability, study full time, are aged 18 to 34 (Stallman, 2010), or are female (Dyrbye et al., 2007; Stallman, 2010).

Flourishing is a natural ‘antidote’ to mental health problems, and represents a variety of positive psychological and emotional strengths (Diener et al., 2010; Keyes, 2002; Seligman, 2011). Thus, initiatives that encourage and enhance flourishing in university students can help address negative trends in mental health problems in a variety of ways. For example, the majority of students experiencing mental health problems within higher education settings tend to do so without receiving treatment (Garlow et al., 2008). Increasing communication and debate about flourishing - and mental health and wellbeing more generally - may encourage students experiencing mental health issues to seek out support and obtain appropriate treatment. Flourishing-oriented initiatives also have potential to act as preventative measures against the development of mental health problems, particularly in at-risk students, by promoting skills and knowledge for wellbeing. Many such initiatives have already been implemented in primary and secondary schools internationally and have yielded positive results (Waters, 2011). The Penn Resiliency Program (Gillham, Jaycox, Reivich, Seligman, & Silver, 1990), for example, has been in implementation in a number of schools across the United States, United Kingdom, Australia and elsewhere over the last 20 years, effectively and lastingly preventing the development of depressive symptoms in students by teaching optimism, assertiveness, relaxation, and other positive skills (Seligman, Ernst, Gillham, Reivich, & Linkins, 2009). A large range of other programmes and interventions for promoting flourishing in school settings have also been implemented with high rates of success (e.g. Bernard & Walton, 2011; O’Keeffe, 2012). These trends at the level of primary and secondary schools are promising of the effectiveness of flourishing-promoting initiatives to prevent mental health problems, and suggest that similar initiatives developed in accordance with the specific needs of older students may also help to prevent mental health issues within higher education.

## **2.3. Higher education institutions are strategically well-placed to promote flourishing**

In this paper, I wish to give some focus to the case of Japan. Although my previous arguments largely apply to Japan as much as to other countries, the argument that higher education institutions offer a unique opportunity to promote flourishing is particularly relevant to Japan due to the nature of its higher education system and to the cultural value placed upon it.

One key reason for promoting flourishing within Japan relates to suicide. Japan has had internationally high suicide rates for several decades, an issue which has become a national public health concern (Nakao & Takeuchi, 2006). Some evidence suggests the reasons for suicide have changed over the years. One study, for example, covering the period between 1978 and 1995, found that suicides related to relationship problems became less common, while suicides due to work-related stressors (primarily among men) and psychiatric disorders (primarily among women) increased during this time (Lester & Saito, 1998-9). Of particular concern, though, is the high suicide rates among Japanese young people.

According to the most recent publication of Japan's *Statistical Yearbook* (Statistics Japan, 2015), suicide is - by far - the most common cause of death among young men and women in both the 15-24 and 25-34 age groups.

Interestingly, Japan also enjoys an internationally high literacy rate (Newby, Weko, Breneman, Johanneson, & Maassen, 2009) - even at tertiary level - with approximately 76% of high school graduates going on to enrol in some form of higher education (Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology [MEXT], 2006). This has been attributed to reasons such as the wide range of higher education establishments (e.g. universities, *kosen* [technical colleges], *senmon gakko* [vocationally-oriented professional training colleges], and others), which together cater for a diverse range of career aspirations, and the high cultural value Japanese families place upon children's intellectual and moral development (Newby et al., 2009). Given that such a high percentage of young people participate in higher education, higher education institutions appear to be a strategically well-placed domain in which concentrated numbers of young people can be targeted through initiatives aimed at promoting flourishing, particularly among at-risk age groups (Eisenberg et al., 2007; Statistics Japan, 2015). Such initiatives may be useful in encouraging more open discussion about depression and other mental health issues in higher education settings, since depression is often closely implicated in the aetiology of suicide (Nakao & Takeuchi, 2006), and equip young people with skills and knowledge to enhance their potential to flourish (Seligman, 2008).

#### **2.4. Promoting flourishing can help the higher education sector remain socially relevant**

Japanese society is currently undergoing a process of depopulation, though which it is expected to have decreased by 25% by the middle of the 21st century (Newby et al., 2009). This trend is likely to have a significant impact upon higher education institutions - and on the education sector more generally - as they adapt structurally and functionally to remain relevant, productive, and useful as a social institution (Central Council for Education, 2005).

Depopulation will bring about a decrease in the working population, which will necessarily effect a reduction in public funds. If anything, however, there is likely to be an *increased* need for public funds in order to finance sectors which will experience increased demand, such as geriatric healthcare and social security (Newby et al., 2009). In order to maintain public funds, the reduction of the *size* of the workforce must be compensated for through an increase in labour *productivity*. Thus, the key challenge for higher education institutions will be to train professionals with broader knowledge, more transferrable skill sets, and a greater adaptability to assuming diverse responsibilities in the workforce (Newby et al., 2009), which will bring with it a need to consider 'ideal visions' of the higher education sector and the specific means by which individuals may be educated to take up the challenges of the future (Central Council for Education, 2005; MEXT, 2006).

The promotion of human flourishing is an endeavour congruent with the gradual evolution of higher education institutions. As noted earlier (section 2.2.), flourishing enables, and is enabled by, more effective learning and encourages individuals to express greater curiosity and creativity (Fredrickson, 2004). Implementation of programmes and practices aimed at enhancing flourishing in higher education students therefore has potential to contribute to the sector's adaptation process by aiding the effective training of skilled professionals for the future.

### **3. A RESEARCH AGENDA ON FLOURISHING IN HIGHER EDUCATION**

There are many possible areas of inquiry that may contribute to the development of initiatives that can support and enhance flourishing in students and staff in higher education settings. It is important that such initiatives are developed on the basis of research to ensure that they meet the specific needs of students and staff and that they effectively 'fit' with the structural and functional nuances of higher education as a unique domain. Field research is of particular value in this endeavour due to its sensitivity to such nuance (Burgess, 1984), and in this sense is worth acknowledging as a driver in the development of flourishing-oriented initiatives alongside theoretical research and extrapolations from other populations or domains (e.g. children or schools). I propose here five avenues of research that may be pursued.

Perhaps one of the first areas research must address is the nature of human flourishing in higher education settings. Developing an understanding of what flourishing means to those participating in higher education - as students, academics, or support staff - can yield ideas about what kinds of needs flourishing-oriented initiatives must endeavour to meet and what overall goals they may strive to accomplish. Such understandings may reflect existing ideas about the nature of flourishing (e.g. Durkheim, 1897/1951; Seligman, 2011) but, vitally, are also likely to extend and enrich these by giving insights into the nuances of flourishing in higher education as a unique context (Rombs, 2014; Burgess, 1984). Research in this area may also make connections with broader mental health issues within higher education settings (Stallman, 2010; Stewart-Brown et al., 2000) and encourage discussion on how the promotion of flourishing may contribute to addressing these.

Further research is also called for regarding classroom (and other learning environment) practices and their capacity to aid student, staff, and collective flourishing within higher education. This includes explorations of 'everyday' practices such as teaching methods, curricula, and learning activities in addition to the latent understandings that underly these, such as academics' educational philosophies, students' beliefs and expectations about learning and wellbeing in higher education, and the ways both students and staff experience and negotiate teaching and learning processes in the context



of curricular and other constraints. Such research may benefit the development of flourishing-oriented initiatives that can be integrated with existing practices in the learning environment (Fredrickson, 2004; Noddings, 2003; Seligman, 2008).

Connected with research on formal learning environments, there is also need for research on how student and staff flourishing may be supported and enhanced within higher education settings *outside* of the classroom. Educational institutions already encompass a wide range of public and private programmes and events which enrich their role within their communities (Schwartz, 2003). Through further research, these may be enhanced or supplemented in the future with other extra-curricular and community-oriented activities aimed at promoting flourishing. The success already observed in similar activities in primary and secondary schools (e.g. Seligman, 2008; Seligman et al., 2009) suggests that such activities are promising in their potential to enable individuals and groups to flourish.

More work is also needed on the wider context within which higher education institutions operate and into which initiatives for promoting flourishing must be integrated. It is necessary to acknowledge that higher education institutions operate within a variety of legal and other frameworks imposed by governmental authorities and/or regulatory bodies (e.g. Newby et al., 2009) and that, simultaneously, they are an environment in which competing institutional (e.g. income maximisation; Slaughter & Rhoades, 2004) and personal (e.g. grade maximisation; Entwistle & Peterson, 2004) interests can override the focus on fundamental educational goals such as learning, engagement, and human flourishing. Developing an understanding of how these interests influence students, staff, and institutions collectively - and, conversely, of how students and staff perceive and negotiate such interests - may provide clues as to how flourishing-oriented programmes and practices may be effectively integrated into the wider context of the higher education landscape.

Finally, there is a need for more research into human flourishing as an *ideal* in higher education. Alongside exploring how to promote flourishing in the context of higher education as it currently is, it is also necessary to imagine how an ideal higher education institution (or sector) may operate in the future (Central Council for Education, 2005) and how the promotion of flourishing may be effectively integrated into such an ideal. This may make possible a greater foresight of the kind of higher education we seek to build, what roles human flourishing may play as an ideal in such a higher education, and how current efforts to understand and promote flourishing within higher education may be steered towards such ideals in the future.

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