



# The Role of Higher Education in Solving Global Problems

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**Purpose:** World's global problems need urgent and sustainable solutions and actions. This conceptual paper seeks to answer the question: How can higher education develop authentic and responsible citizens who will be able to act and solve global problems?

**Study design/methodology/approach:** Building on a range of selected literature from psychology, philosophy, education, and leadership, the paper first clarifies the concepts of authenticity and responsibility and then focuses on the role of higher education in supporting learners to develop their personal authenticity and strengthen their responsibility for others and their environment.

**Findings:** The findings show that it is possible to become both authentic and responsible, and higher education curriculum and pedagogy play a decisive role in it.

**Originality/value:** The paper contributes to the discourses about the role of higher education in solving global problems. It also offers implications for higher educational researchers, learners and educators, university curriculum and pedagogy.

## Introduction

In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the role of authenticity and responsibility as personal characteristics has increased because the world faces global problems that would immediately need sustainable solutions. Nixon argues that we need collective solutions to collective problems “in an increasingly complex world of global inter-connectivity and difference where the most pressing problems are collective: global warming, the protection of the environment, the movement of labour, the protection of children and women from trafficking” (Nixon, 2012, p. 148). Experts identified fifty major problem areas for humanity; among them are artificial intelligence, cities and global development, health and humanity, social inequality, global political instability, threats to democracy, wars, genocides, terrorism, nuclear and biological weapons, climate change, waste disposal, and species extinction (Lufkin, 2017). Jakubik (2021, p. 4) specifies the following context for higher education: regulations, policy directives, technology advancement, robotisation, digitalisation, economic downturn, demographic changes, health crisis, COVID-19 pandemic, climate crisis, pollution, global warming, humanitarian crisis, immigration, wars, and moral crisis. Similarly, philosopher Maxwell talks about “the global problems that threaten our future: the climate crisis; the current pandemic; the destruction of the natural world, catastrophic loss of wildlife, and mass extinction of species; lethal modern war; the spread of modern armaments; the menace of nuclear weapons; pollution of earth, sea and air; rapid rise in the human population; increasing antibiotic resistance; the degradation of democratic politics, brought about in part by the internet” (Maxwell, 2021a, Preface). To successfully address all these global problems, we need wise people with courage, and moral values, to act responsibly, and higher education could play a decisive role in it.

This paper is contemporary because people are impatient, demanding not only nice talks - “bla-bla-bla” as Greta Thunberg, a Swedish environmental activist, said - but solutions and more actions. “On November 13 2021, COP26 concluded in Glasgow with all countries agreeing with the Glasgow Climate Pact to keep 1.5C alive and finalise the outstanding elements of the Paris Agreement” (COP26, 2021, p. 4). However, according to Thunberg, COP26 was a failure. More actions and collaborations are needed in solving climate change and global warming trends. Furthermore, the COVID-19 health crisis, the immigration crisis in the EU, e.g., the

recent Poland-Belarus migrant crisis (Aljazeera, 2021), and the ongoing Russian-Ukrainian war would need immediate solutions as well. Finally, we need people with knowledge, skills, competencies, understanding, authenticity, courage and responsibility to address global problems.

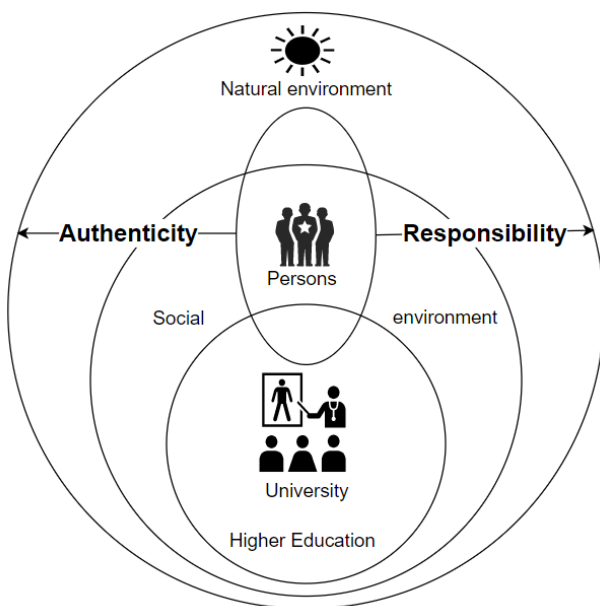
My personal interest in this topic originated from my background in higher education (HE). I believe that the role of HE is essential in educating future generations capable of acting with authenticity and responsibility for the common good. While authenticity is inward-directed (i.e., to personal development), responsibility has an outward direction (i.e., taking care of others and the environment). Therefore, education has not only epistemological aims like developing knowledge, skills, and competencies of learners but also ontological aims such as educating people to be in the world, be good citizens, and transfer their knowledge to different contexts for the common benefit of all.

Therefore, in this theoretical paper, I seek to answer the question: *How can higher education develop authentic and responsible citizens who will be able to act and solve global problems?* First, in the research design section, I present the research problem, framework, questions and objectives, and method. Then, building on a range of selected literature from psychology, philosophy, leadership, and education, I clarify the concepts of authenticity and responsibility as personal characteristics. Next, I focus on the role of higher education in supporting learners to develop their personal authenticity and strengthen their responsibility for others and their environment. Then, I discuss the findings related to the research questions. Finally, I indicate limitations and implications for higher educational researchers, learners and educators, university curriculum and pedagogy.

**Research Design**

***Research Problem and Framework***

The research problem is how to find sustainable solutions to global, environmental, and social problems (Aljazeera, 2021; COP26, 2021; Jakubik, 2021; Lufkin, 2017; Maxwell, 2021a; Nixon, 2012) presented in the Introduction. Therefore, the main research question is: *How can higher education develop authentic and responsible citizens who will be able to act and solve global problems?*



**Figure 1: Research framework**

**Research Questions and Objectives**

Based on the research framework (Figure 1), I formulate the following sub-questions and objectives:

- What is authenticity? The objective is to explore the complex concept of authenticity.
- What is responsibility? The objective is to explore the multi-dimensional concept of responsibility.
- How can higher education help to become both an authentic and responsible person? The objective is to show the possible role of higher education in becoming authentic and responsible.

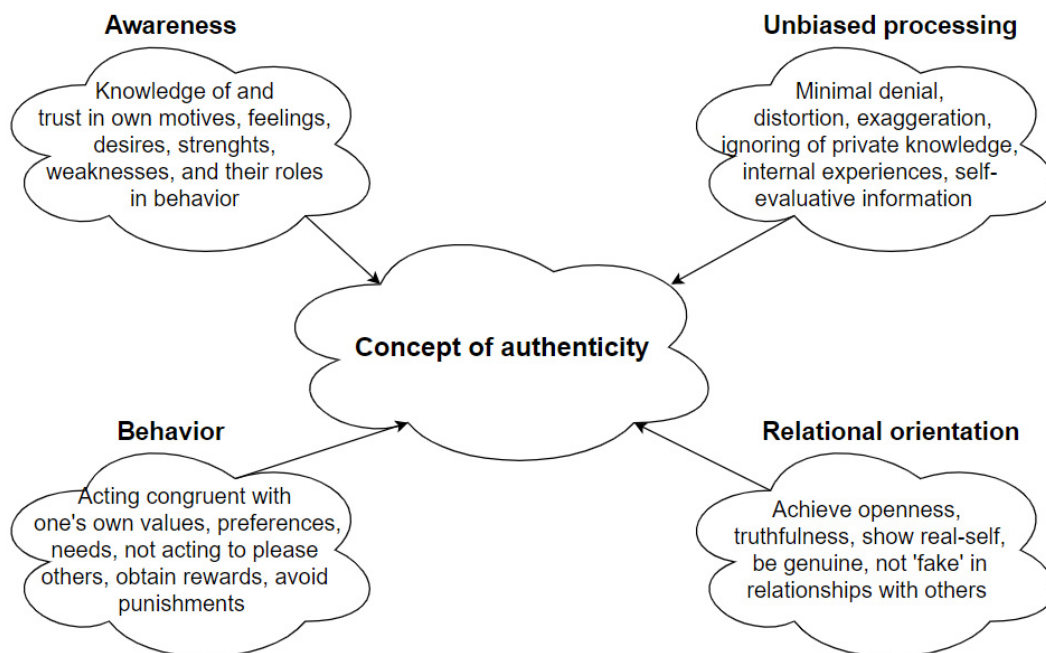
**Research Method**

The research methodology is constructivism, and the method is qualitative. The paper builds on a selected range of literature from psychology (Arnold *et al.*, 2005; Kernis & Goldman, 2006), philosophy (Barnett, 2011, 2015, 2018; Maxwell, 2012, 2021a; Sartre, 2018), leadership (Carmichael, 2018; George, Sims, McLean & Mayer, 2018; Goffee & Jones, 2018; Hewlett, 2018; Ibarra, 2018; Seppala, 2018), and education (Barnett, 2011, 2015, 2018; Jakubik, 2021; Nixon, 2012).

**Concepts**

**Authenticity**

The objective is to explore the complex concept of authenticity. The “*know thyself*” is one of the three Delphic aphorisms. For people, it is essential to know who they are, what culture they belong to, what roots and what values they have. Knowing yourselves, self-awareness, and being true to ourselves determine our thinking, choices, decisions, and actions. Therefore, authenticity is more than knowing yourself. It is a personal characteristic that expresses itself in behaviour, actions and practising beliefs, values and principles. It also means some permanency, maintaining our true selves in all life situations.



**Figure 2: Four components of authenticity** (based on Kernis & Goldman, 2006, p. 302)

The concept of authenticity can be approached from different perspectives. Kernis & Goldman (2006, pp. 283-357) discuss the philosophical and psychological views of authentic functioning. They argue that authenticity is related to ontology and phenomenology from a philosophical point of view. According to them, “authentic functioning is characterised in terms of people’s (1) self-understanding, (2) openness to objectively recognising their ontological realities (e.g., evaluating their desirable and undesirable self-aspects), (3) actions, and (4) orientation towards interpersonal relationships” (Ibid., p. 284).

Authentic functioning means self-understanding, including self-examination in forming one’s actions (Socrates). Openness to objectivity implies that people are willing to recognise relevant information (Sartre) objectively. Authentic functioning also means self-knowledge directed actions to the pursuit of the highest good (Aristotle) and an orientation towards others, “being-in-the-world” (Heidegger). Kernis & Goldman (2006, p. 293) argue that an existential view of authentic functioning is reflected in an individual being “the master of his or her own domain”. Authentic functioning, therefore, is a combination of cognitive and behavioural processes, “how individuals discover, develop, and construct a core sense of self and how this core self is maintained over time and situation” (Ibid.).

Kernis & Goldman define authenticity as the “unimpeded operation of one’s true- or core-self in one’s daily enterprise” (2006, p. 344). They describe four components of authenticity (Kernis & Goldman, 2006, p. 302). Drawing on their descriptions, I present the characteristics of the four authenticity components in Figure 2. According to Kernis & Goldman (2006), from a psychological perspective, authenticity as a concept has four separable components. These components are awareness; unbiased processing; behaviour; and relational orientation (Kernis & Goldman, 2006, pp. 293-301). Becoming an authentic person is a lifelong process. First, it requires self-awareness: knowing yourself, your motives, emotions, preferences, and abilities. Second, it needs clarity and objectivity to evaluate your strengths and weaknesses without blaming yourself. Third, to act authentically, in ways consistent with your own values and needs, even at the risk of criticism or rejection, is the behavioural dimension of the concept. Finally, authenticity has a relational component: being in close contact with others, being tolerant, compassionate, accepting of otherness, and being truthful and honest.

### ***Responsibility***

The objective is to explore the multi-dimensional concept of responsibility. As a leading philosopher, Barnett expresses his concerns and argues: ‘Responsibility’ implies obligation, but any principle on which an obligation might be founded is in doubt. The foundations of ‘responsibility’ seem to be crumbling” (Barnett, 2011, p. 95). Concurring with Barnett, I argue that the concept of responsibility is multi-dimensional and can be viewed from different perspectives. In Figure 3, I summarised four views of responsibility such as individual responsibility, social responsibility, universal responsibility and responsibility for science.

Individual responsibility is when persons are responsible for people in their close relationships (family members, friends, peers) and their own behaviour (actions, practices, tasks, roles). Social responsibility includes responsibilities for work relationships, superiors, and employees, leadership responsibilities for people’s wellbeing and safety, and managerial responsibility for the results and performance of the organisation. Universal responsibility comprises environmental, legal, moral and ethical responsibilities. The role of science has increased with technological developments. Therefore, scientists are responsible for their research, applying valid data, avoiding ‘fake’ data and information, and applying their knowledge to benefit society and people. The high level of responsibility could cause problems for people. Work psychologist Arnold *et al.* (2005) claim that people who face high-level organisational responsibility for employees, people’s wellbeing, health and safety, physical assets, equipment,

budget, financial performance, innovation, trade secrets, and the environment could suffer from a high level of stress and health problems (Arnold *et al.*, 2005, pp. 401-402).

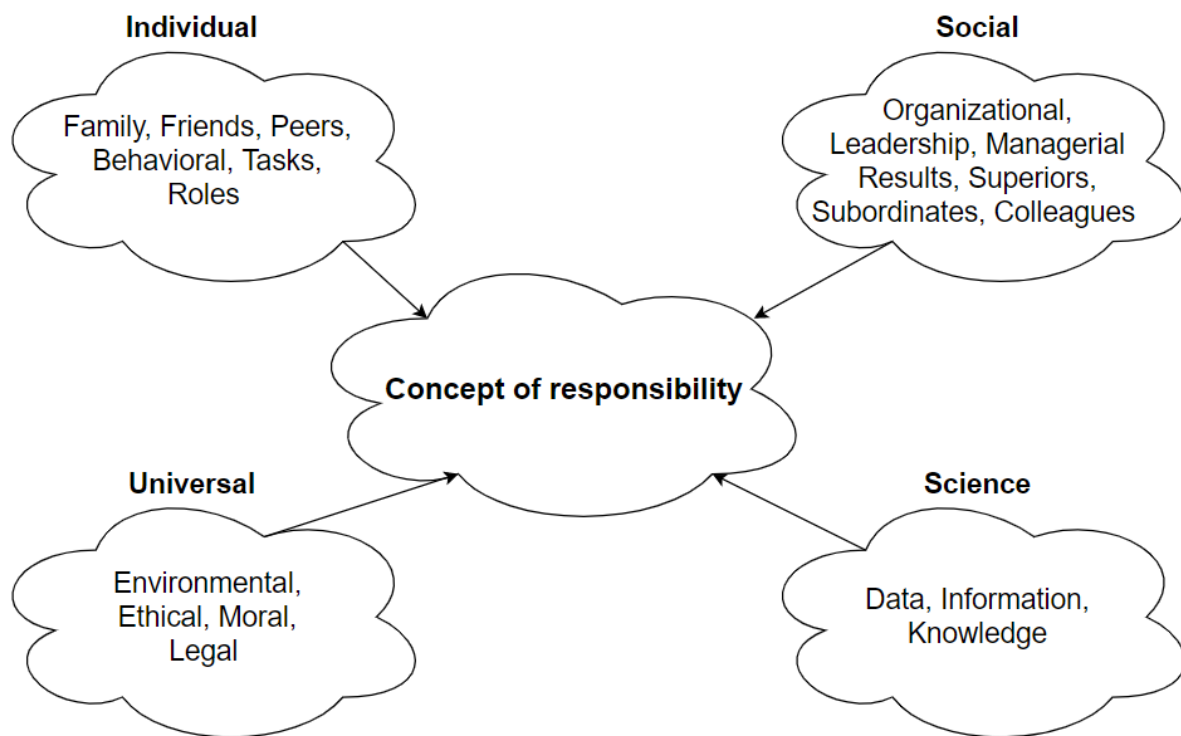


Figure 3: Four views of responsibility

### The Role of Higher Education

How can higher education help to become both an authentic and responsible person? The objective is to show the possible role of higher education in becoming authentic and responsible. Barnett (2011) is a leading philosopher and theorist of higher education. His research focuses on the social philosophy of the university. He approaches the understanding of a university with philosophical concepts of being, becoming, understanding, space (i.e., intellectual and discursive, epistemological, pedagogical and curricular, ontological space) and time, culture and anarchy, authenticity and responsibility. He discusses authenticity and responsibility, not from a person but from a university as a higher educational institution's point of view. He argues that 'Authenticity' and 'responsibility' are both significant concepts. And both are crucial for comprehending the university in the twenty-first century" (Barnett, 2011, p. 102).

Barnett (2011, p. 103-104) presents a framework with two dimensions: authentic/not-authentic and responsible/not responsible. This framework could demonstrate higher education's role in developing learners' authenticity and responsibility. According to him, the four options for being at a university are:

1. *Not-authentic and not-responsible university* is committed to its own interests and entrepreneurial, it focuses on income generation, and it does not maintain collective standards or general assessment practices of students
2. *Not-authentic but responsible university* is not overly concerned with its own values, but it is highly responsive to opportunities such as institutional advancement, improving the balance sheet



3. *Authentic but not-responsible university* attends its own interests in learning and inquiry and upholds simple standards, but it does not care much for the problems of the world
4. *Authentic and responsible university* looks both inward (i.e., inner calling, inner being) and beyond itself (i.e., otherness), it is true to itself, it has responsibilities beyond itself, it has concerns for the problems of the world, it is not a comfortable position because it calls for judgement and carefulness

Barnett (2011) concludes that it is not easy, but a university can achieve both authenticity and responsibility at the same time. I agree with Barnett that it is not easy to be both authentic and responsible, but it is a necessary position to take to solve the global problems of humanity (Figure 1).

Nevertheless, if a university achieves both authenticity and responsibility, it will be visible in its curriculum, pedagogy, and approaches to learning and inquiry. This way, higher education learners will likely develop their own authenticity and responsibility. Barnett (2015) argues that learning for an unknown future impacts the university curriculum and pedagogy. An unknown future ‘*serves as a major organising principle in the curriculum design and the enacting of the pedagogy*’ (Barnett, 2015, p. 219, emphasis original). According to him, the focus of learning will shift from knowledge, skills, and generic skills to human qualities. He calls this change an ‘*ontological turn*’ (Ibid.). In a complex world, where the future is unknown, the ‘*educational task, in principle, not an epistemological task ... the educational task is primarily an ontological task*’ (Ibid. 224). Therefore, higher education needs to focus on developing human qualities (being, self, authenticity, responsibility) that will make learners succeed and flourish in different, complex, unknown situations.

To be and become an authentic and responsible person; therefore, a different pedagogy in higher education is needed. There are four pedagogical options outlined by Barnett (2015, p. 228). Disciplinary initiation (knowledge field as given) and generic skills (fixed ontologies for an unknown world) belong to ‘no risk’ pedagogical options. At the same time, disciplinary wonder (knowledge field as uncertain and open to change) and human beings as such (open ontologies for an unknown world) are ‘high-risk’ pedagogical options. Concurring with Barnett, I believe that the ‘disciplinary wonder’ and ‘human beings as such’ options, regardless of their high risk, should be the focus of the future curriculum and pedagogy in higher education. ‘*This pedagogy allows for human flourishing as such*’ (Barnett, 2015, p. 230, emphasis original). These high-risk pedagogical options introduce students to uncertainty, where they need to be authentic and responsible in their actions, develop their own standpoints and understanding, and grow as individuals. These pedagogical options engage students as persons, human beings and not only as knowers.

To conclude, the aim of higher education should be to develop authentic human beings with human qualities such as ‘carefulness, thoughtfulness, humility, criticality, receptiveness, resilience, courage and stillness’ (Barnett, 2015, p. 233). Therefore, in my view, Barnett’s four options for being a university can be applied to individuals. It can explain how and why persons could simultaneously become authentic and responsible (Figure 1). Individuals should follow their inner calling, be aware of their strengths and weaknesses, trust in their inner motives and values, trust themselves, should take an objective stand, act congruently with their own values and needs, should achieve truthfulness and openness in their relationships with others (Figure 2). Furthermore, individuals should be responsible for their families, personal connections, and work relationships. They should take universal responsibilities for their environment, follow legal, moral, and ethical rules in their actions, and be responsible for the broader consequences of their scientific discoveries (Figure 3).

## Discussion

In this paper, I sought to answer the question: *How can higher education develop authentic and responsible citizens who will be able to act and solve global problems?* First, the main concepts (Figures 2 and 3) and the role of higher education were presented. Now, I will discuss authenticity and responsibility in broader leadership, education, and philosophical contexts.

Authenticity is also extensively discussed in the leadership literature (Carmichael, 2018; George, Sims, McLean & Mayer, 2018; Goffee & Jones, 2018; Hewlett, 2018; Ibarra, 2018; Seppala, 2018). My discussion follows the four components of authenticity (Figure 2). Related to the awareness component of authenticity, Carmichael emphasises the importance of showing our real emotions, being honest, and not blaming others or external factors for the sources of problems. Showing our feelings about our mistakes will strengthen the authenticity of our message. “When you mess up, admit it. And look appropriately sad about it” (Carmichael, 2018, p. 114).

Regarding the relational component of authenticity (cf., Figure 2), George *et al.* point out: “No one can be authentic by trying to imitate someone else. You can learn from others’ experiences, but there is no way you can be successful when you are trying to be like them. People trust you when you are genuine and authentic, not a replica of someone else” (George *et al.* 2018, pp. 3-4). “When people care deeply about something – anything – they’re more likely to show their true selves. They will not only communicate authenticity, which is the precondition for leadership, but they will show that they are doing more than just playing a role” (Goffee and Jones, 2018, p. 93). The relational dimension of authenticity (Figure 2) is discussed by Seppala, who wonders, “Why is a human connection missing at work?” (Seppala, 2018, p. 77). She argues: “Here’s what may happen if you embrace an authentic and vulnerable stance: Your staff will see you as a human being; they may feel closer to you, they may be prompted to share advice” (Seppala, 2018, p. 82).

A leading contemporary philosopher, Barnett, argues that authenticity has difficulties because we have *multiple personas*, and it would be difficult to identify to which we should be truthful. He asks, “In a liquid world, aren’t we obliged to take on *different personas* such that there is no self to which to be true to be authentic?” (Barnett, 2011, p. 95, emphasis added). Similarly, Ibarra (2018, pp. 39-69) writes about this authenticity paradox for leaders. She asks fascinating questions about authenticity and argues, “A too-rigid definition of authenticity can get in the way of effective leadership” (Ibarra, 2018, p. 45). In her model, there are three dimensions of authenticity: (1) being true to yourself, (2) maintaining strict coherence between what you feel and what you say or do, and (3) making values-based choices. According to her, each of these dimensions is problematic: (1) because we evolve, we have *many selves*. She asks which self we need to be true, (2) you will lose credibility if you disclose your feelings, and (3) values are also evolving. They are contextual, and sticking to old values could hinder leaders’ effectiveness. People give up their true selves to conform to situations, circumstances, and contexts. Why do people compromise their authenticity? Hewlett refers to an exciting Centre for Talent Innovation research where 268 senior executives were surveyed. There was a statement: “I feel the need to compromise my authenticity to conform to executive presence standards at my company”. The answers proved that 45% Asian, 37% African American, 37% Hispanic, and 30% Caucasian executives out of 268 felt they needed to compromise their authenticity (Hewlett, 2018, p. 101).

Educational philosopher Barnett (2011) discusses authenticity and responsibility not as personality traits but as characteristics of an institution, i.e., the university. He ponders if the university can be both authentic and responsible simultaneously. According to him, this is problematic because “‘authenticity’ and ‘responsibility’ seem to contend with each other.

‘Authenticity’ seems to be inner-directed. The authentic person is true to him or herself. ‘Responsibility’, on the other hand, seems to be another direction. It looks out from self and has care or concern for a world beyond” (Barnett, 2011, pp. 95-96). In my view, Barnett is not quite right in saying that authenticity and responsibility are opposed. I do not fully agree with Barnett that authenticity is an inward-oriented concept. I would rather concur with psychologists Kernis & Goldman (2006, p. 302), who pointed out that authenticity has a behavioural and a relational component, too (Figure 2), and they are outward-oriented.

Furthermore, I partly agree with Barnett saying that responsibility is outward-directed. We decide what we are or are not responsible for. It is an individual’s choice. Philosopher Sartre (2018, pp. 718-723) discussed freedom and responsibility. In his view, responsibility is the choice of the person based on their values, and it depends on the individual only. We have the freedom to decide and choose responsibility. I firmly believe, differing from Barnett, that authenticity and responsibility do not contend with each other. They are both inward *and* outward-directed. This is an essential condition of being and becoming both authentic and responsible at the same time.

Being and becoming responsible for the world and creating a better world is discussed by philosopher Maxwell (in Barnett (Ed) 2012, pp. 123-138). Maxwell argues that there is a need for the ‘university of wisdom’. His main point is that in higher education, we need to replace knowledge inquiry with wisdom inquiry because this is the only way to a better world. He has two arguments: problem-solving rationality and aim-pursuing rationality. In his view, the “knowledge inquiry, because of its irrationality, is designed to *intensify*, not help *solve*, our current global problems” (Maxwell, 2012, p. 127).

On the other hand, he argues that “what we need, for wisdom, is an interplay of sceptical rationality and emotion, an interplay of mind and heart, so that we may develop ‘mindful hearts and heartfelt minds’” (Maxwell, 2012, p. 135). He concludes: “We urgently need to bring about a revolution in our universities so that they come to seek and promote wisdom — wisdom being understood to be the capacity to realise what is of value in life, thus including knowledge, understanding and technological know-how, but much else besides. Universities need to take up the task of helping humanity learn how to make progress towards as good a world as possible” (Maxwell, 2012, p. 137).

In this paper section, I aimed to show that authenticity and responsibility are widely discussed in psychology, leadership, philosophy, and education. I also argued and expressed my consent and disagreements.

## Conclusions

### *Findings*

The main research question of this paper was: *How can higher education develop authentic and responsible citizens who will be able to act and solve global problems?* To answer this question, I created a research framework (Figure 1) to show the key concepts (i.e., authenticity, responsibility, persons, higher education) and their relationships with the social and natural environment. Based on this framework, I formulated three sub-questions and objectives. Next, I will summarise the main findings of this conceptual paper.

1. What is authenticity? The objective was to explore the complex concept of authenticity. The findings showed that authenticity is a complex concept with four components: awareness, unbiased processing, behaviour, and a relational orientation (Figure 2 and Kernis & Goldman, 2006).



2. What is responsibility? The objective was to explore the multi-dimensional concept of responsibility. The findings demonstrated that responsibility could be viewed from several perspectives: individual, social, universal, and scientific (Figure 3 and Arnold *et al.*, 2005; Barnett, 2011).
3. How can higher education help to become both an authentic and responsible person? The objective was to show the possible role of higher education in becoming authentic and responsible. The findings revealed that higher education institutions and universities aiming to be authentic and responsible themselves play an important role in developing learners' authenticity and responsibility. Curriculum and pedagogical approaches play vital roles in this process (Barnett, 2011, 2015). Another important finding was that in the future, higher educational tasks should be more ontological than epistemological tasks. Universities should focus on developing the human qualities of learners, such as being authentic and responsible for being able to deal with complex and unexpected situations and solve wicked problems of the world (Aljazeera, 2021; COP26, 2021; Jakubik, 2021; Lufkin, 2017; Maxwell, 2021a; Nixon, 2012).

I discussed these findings in leadership (Carmichael, 2018; George *et al.*, 2018; Goffee & Jones, 2018; Hewlett, 2018; Ibarra, 2018; Seppala, 2018), education (Barnett, 2011, 2012; Maxwell, 2012), and philosophy contexts (Barnett, 2011; Maxwell, 2012; Sartre, 2018). I expressed my views on why and how authenticity and responsibility can be achieved simultaneously.

### ***Limitations and Future Research Directions***

The main limitation of this paper is referring to a selected range of literature. This selection is subjective. It is based on my background knowledge and experience as a higher-education practitioner. Therefore, it might be that important, and relevant sources were unintentionally ignored. Nevertheless, this paper could increase the interest in recent changes in universities, their need to reform the curriculum, and in paying more attention to pedagogical approaches. I believe this paper contributes to the discourses about the challenges of higher education.

This paper has further research implications for leadership. First, researchers could collect and analyse cases when authenticity and responsibility helped to solve problems. They could research situations, critical incidents and their solutions when authenticity needed to be compromised. Finally, researchers can write case studies about when taking responsibility led to problems or did not solve problems.

### ***Implications***

Implications for higher educational researchers, learners and educators, curriculum and pedagogy are:

1. *Transformation of higher education and universities* – Researchers could explore the 'wisdom university' concept of Maxwell (2012, 2021a, 2021b) and the 'ecological university' concept of Barnett (2018). They can study if their characteristics could be detected and how to move universities in these directions. Related to the university of the future and the future of the university, Jakubik (2021, pp. 23-25) outlines several future research directions for higher education researchers. Barnett (2018) argues that the ecological university is a 'feasible utopia' and is the university of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Researchers can explore the empirical, ideological, imaginative, and value conditions proposed by Barnett (2011, pp. 60-62) will make the ecological university a reality. Finally, researchers and higher education practitioners could develop ways to implement the ecological university.

2. *Knowledge, skills, competencies* – Researchers can study situations when existing knowledge does not help to solve problems and how to rediscover ancient knowledge and apply it in problem-solving in new contexts. How to unlearn and relearn is an exciting research area too. But, will knowledge, skills, and competencies lose their leading role in higher education because of the need for an ‘ontological turn’ (Barnett, 2015, p. 219)? What will impact the universities’ mission and vision when their epistemological tasks lose importance?
3. *Educators and learners* – Researchers can discover educators’ feelings, thoughts, and behaviour when they experience high uncertainty and complexity, and how their authenticity and responsibility helped restrain them in these situations, how the high uncertainty influenced their authenticity, if they needed to compromise, why, how, and what it meant for them.
4. *Curriculum and pedagogy* – Researchers can explore how to infuse excitement and unexpected situations in the curriculum and follow learners’ reflections (understanding, sense-making, feelings, behaviour). Researching the possibility of ‘wisdom pedagogy’ where knowledge-inquiry and wisdom-inquiry can be in harmony and support each other, to study ‘high-risk’ pedagogical options such as ‘disciplinary wonder’ (knowledge field as uncertain and open to change) and ‘human beings as such, (open ontologies for an unknown world), develop ‘wisdom pedagogy’, i.e., a pedagogy that educates people to be happy, to flourish and be able to solve the wicked problems of the world, to move to a better world (Jakubik, 2021; Maxwell, 2021a).

In brief, in this paper, I explored and discussed why it is necessary and possible to become authentic *and* responsible simultaneously. I argued that this could be achieved and that higher education could play a decisive role. Finally, I outlined a thorough higher education research agenda for the coming decades.

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