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## **Propósitos humanísticos y utilitarios de la educación superior en el contexto del enfoque de competencia: presentación del problema**

### **Humanistic and utilitarian purposes of higher education in the context of the competence approach: Presentation of a problema**

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#### **Resumen**

El propósito de este artículo es examinar la tensión que existe entre los propósitos principales de la educación superior, humanista y utilitario, mediante el enfoque por competencias. Las principales conclusiones del estudio teórico, basado en los enfoques estructural-funcional y sistémico-genético, son que esta tensión se resuelve introduciendo las competencias universales (el análogo ruso de las competencias clave, las soft skills), que debido a su especificidad, pueden desempeñar funciones utilitarias, humanísticas, integradoras y equilibradoras del aprendizaje. La educación y la autoeducación (desarrollo intelectual, valórico y existencial respectivamente) en la matriz universalizadora de la reproducción de la cultura, pueden transferir rasgos de la educación universitaria clásica (humanismo y universalismo) a la educación especializada de los institutos, contribuyendo a su convergencia. Sin embargo, la visión, desde el enfoque de competencia, de los dos propósitos principales de la educación, superan la dicotomía artificial entre ellos, y sigue siendo en esencia instrumental y no autotélico.

**Palabras clave:** aprendizaje orientado a la competencia, filosofía educativa, educación superior, competencias clave, habilidades blandas, universidad

#### **Abstract**

The purpose of this article is to examine the tension that exists between the main purposes of higher education, humanistic and utilitarian, through the competency-based approach. The main conclusions of the theoretical study, based on structural-functional and system-genetic approaches,

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are that this tension can be removed through introducing universal competences (the Russian alternative to key competences, soft skills), that due to their specificity, they can perform utilitarian, humanistic, integrating and balancing functions of learning. Also, upbringing and self-upbringing (intellectual, value-based and existential development, respectively) in the universalizing matrix of culture reproduction; they can transfer features of classical university education (the humanistic focus and universalism) into a specialized institute education, facilitating their convergence. However, the competence approach-based perspective of two central purposes of education, while overcoming the artificial dichotomy between them, still remains instrumental rather than autotelic.

**Keywords:** competence-based education, educational philosophy, higher education, key competencies, soft skills, university

### Introduction

The phenomenon of education cannot be understood independently of its purpose. The extensive literature addressing the subject is a convincing proof (Barnett, 2018; Biesta, 2020; Collini, 2012; MacAllister, 2016). Especially many controversies arise around higher education. The present-day discourse on higher education moves away from the idea of the university not only because universities have been squeezed out of their leading positions by other (specialized) higher education institutions (Lovetsky, Samylov, & Kosushkin, 2022; Tomyuk et al., 2019), and not only because they have identity issues in today's educational environment (thus, giving rise to the idea crisis (Habermas & Blažek, 1987; Kerr, 2001; Readings, 1996)), but also because modern higher education cannot be constituted (being a teleological activity) by any single purpose (mission). Unlike other areas of human activities, education is guided by multiple purposes.

The competence approach captures the awareness of multiplicity of purposes. Unsurprisingly, researchers whose ideas form the backbone of the competence approach are so adamant in their requirement for the explicit (rather than implied) multiplicity of educational purposes (Delors & UNESCO, 1996; Schleicher, 2018). As Bergan (2019) notes, the societal and democratic role of higher education started being emphasized in Ministerial communiqués much more strongly than previously. These are official purposes identified for higher education systems of the countries participating in the Bologna Process, but they are also relevant for other countries. However, the multiplicity of purposes (especially, if they are not tightly interrelated) also suggests that they can fight for priority, thus letting the competence approach be torn by conflicting aspirations and interfering with the status of the unified basis for educational policies of different countries.

Purposes of education are directed either at a person or at society (i.e., they are either individual or social); they reflect the intentions of either conservatives or progressives (Boulter, 2017). However, the main dividing line that will be analysed in our article passes between the humanistic and utilitarian purposes of education. No consensus has been reached in long-lasting debates over the mission of higher education: Is it aimed at a universal man (not so much an erudite person as a well-rounded personality) or at a competitive person? Seemingly, the competence approach should be able to settle the dispute, but it is adding fuel to the flame (Anderson-Levitt & Gardinier, 2021; Schleicher, 2018). This is associated with the initial ambivalence of CBE: On the one hand, it meets the political requirement for channelling education along the neoliberal, mercantilist path (this is clearly seen in many EU and OECD documents); on the other hand, it has a humanistic potential (this is typical for UNESCO and some recent initiatives of the OECD (2019)).

This ambivalence is explicitly mirrored in supra-professional, supra-subject, multifunctional, cross-cutting, transferable, transmittable (from one context to another – so that they are not limited to a particular field) and meta-level competences (key competences, soft skills (Marin-Zapata et al., 2022; Pluzhnirova et al., 2021)), which contribute to the uniqueness of the modern competence approach, making it different from its earlier versions (popular in the system of vocational education in the United States and some European countries in the 1970s-1980s (Zhao, 2020)). Therefore, this paper will focus on them or rather on their Russian alternative – universal competences (UCs). Along the way, the following questions (which many researchers tend to neglect) come to the fore, requiring an in-depth critical analysis: Do utilitarian and humanistic purposes strongly diverge? They are frequently contradistinguished as instrumental (the purpose serves for achieving other purposes) and autotelic (from the Greek words for ‘auto’ = self, ‘telos’ = purpose); however, is it justified (especially in the context of the competence approach)? In light of this complex context the aim of our theoretical interdisciplinary article is to explore how the purposes of higher education (or rather assumptions of these purposes) are interrelated with the competence approach and find out what role is assigned to universal (key) competences, including any nuances involved.

## Methodology

To achieve the above aim, we have opted for qualitative research method, including interpretation, systematization, and critical analysis of philosophical, historical and pedagogical studies of Russian and foreign scientists as well as EU, OECD and UNESCO documents addressing two subject areas: The purposes of higher education and competence-based education. The field where these two subjects intersect has been insufficiently studied. Although the relationship between these subjects has been extensively described (in particular, Naval, Villacís, & Ibarrola-García, 2022; Rychen, 2016; Schleicher, 2018; Trilling & Fadel, 2009; Yarygin et al., 2019), its problematization, discussion and contestation remain mostly neglected (Biesta, 2015; Kayumov, 2017; Zhao, 2020).

In the context of our essay, we think that ideas of the contemporary educational philosopher Biesta (2021) are most heuristic, and we will use them as benchmarks. He breaks the purpose of education into three domains: Qualification, socialisation, and subjectification. These three domains can be not only synergistically interlinked, but also can be conflicting. Biesta's three domains of educational purpose can be compared with three levels of education, which, according to Finnish educational philosophers Kukkola and Pikkarainen (2017), students are passed through successively – pragmatic, social and existential, as well as (more vaguely) with three types (levels) of competences specified in the Russian Federal State Educational Standards of Higher Education 3++ (FSSESHE 3++) – professional, general professional and universal.

In these three models, the first level of education is, by and large, international and unified; the second level is culturally and socially specific; the third level involves individualization and universalization of the experience acquired at the two previous levels, employing the universalizing matrix (the concept developed by Rybin (2009)) reproducing this experience (and amply 'placing' it into an individual) through 'intermittent socialization' (the notion reconstruct by us from structural sociology and social psychology), which is critically important in the VUCA world.

Thus, the combination of the structural-functional approach (Ushakov, 2019) with the systemic-genetic approach (Kislov & Shmurygina, 2013) serves as the theoretical and methodological foundation of our study. Using the structural-functional approach we can look at higher education through the synchronic dimension as at a multilevel, intrinsically structured, integral phenomenon, while with the systemic-genetic approach, we perceive it diachronically as a flexible historical phenomenon capable of adapting to requirements of the specific period.

Consequently, the search for a certain suprahistorical “eternal” purpose (idea, mission) of higher education is replaced by the understanding that its purposes depend on the current needs of society.

## Results

### *Universalism and the universalizing matrix in higher education*

Today, the focused specialization prevails over universalization, though it is a recent and presumably a limiting trend. Note that talking about specialization (and associated massification) of higher education, Durkheim (1933/1984) pointed out such positive sides as mass reproduction of ‘morally integral specialists’ combining the characteristics of the specialist and the cultivated person, while Ortega y Gasset (1932), on the contrary, pointed out such downsides as dominance of ‘the specialist’ over the ‘educated person,’ the mass-man over the aristocracy of the spirit.

Universality is manifested in the specific epistemological and institutional nature of university education. It was antiquity that promoted the conception of a university (before the university emerged as a social institution), perceiving education as universal, generally essential knowledge (Yampolskaya, 2014). In the Middle Ages, the university was institutionalized as an autonomous, international association of professors, masters and students (*universitas magistrorum et scholarium*) sharing love of learning.

During the course of history, both features of the university education underwent transformation, but remained basically universal. The transformation process can be described as the following sequence: The universality of knowledge was represented by contemplation (antiquity, the Middle Ages), by fundamentality (the Modern Times), and by interdisciplinarity (our time); institutional universality was manifested in internationality (the Middle Ages); then, it ceased to exist (the Modern Times: see the Humboldt national university project) and re-emerged in internationalization (our time). Although universalization comprises the notion of universality (both in the epistemological and institutional meaning), it extends beyond its boundaries.

The focus on universalization (‘placing’ the entire condensed collective experience into an individual), which acts as a guideline, priority and benchmark, is typical of university education. This focus is achieved through the so-called universalizing matrix of cultural reproduction, which is aimed to develop an individual as a universal person possessing basic theoretical and practical knowledge and, therefore, able to store the entire collective experience while continuing to build it

up. It departs from the previous purpose when an individual was developed as a single-skilled professional (as commonly found in training practices (family, artisan, guild, etc.) since division of labor (Rybin, 2009). It was antiquity that offered a pattern of the first known universalizing matrix used in Paideia combining learning and upbringing.

Universalization is achieved not only through acquisition of higher knowledge (i.e. learning), but also through values (i.e. upbringing), through existences (i.e. self-upbringing as the highest level of upbringing). However, upbringing and self-upbringing components were quite promptly replaced by learning (under the pretext that learning and involving students into the research process have truly upbringing significance, developing inquisitiveness, enquiring mind, passion for learning new things and other epistemological virtues (Zavaley, 2014) as well as courage, freedom, and confidence) and, in fact, were removed from the universalizing matrix. Upon the graduation of a higher education institution, a student develops (using Ortega y Gasset's terminology) into an 'educated barbarian' or, in other words, into a person combining high professionalism and low culture, and hardly able to understand himself and the surrounding world.

The unity of three leading constituents of human personality – mind, will and emotion – the parity of which was held in high regard by antique education and was maintained at the medieval university, during the Modern Times was narrowed down to one constituent – the mind, and the significance of its development is still being prioritized in modern education. The present-day VUCA world calls for a different model of a graduate.

Historically, there were a lot of candidates for the role of a (self) upbringing component in the universalizing matrix or even for the role of an integrator responsible for holistic worldview and world perception due to combined value-based, existential and intellectual development. Universalization was achieved under the auspices of religious education (medieval universities), the Faculty of Philosophy (at the Humboldt University), humanities and arts (at liberal arts colleges in the United States; their former significance is being revived by Nussbaum (1997)), Marxist teaching (at higher education institutions in the Soviet Union), or, presumably, through the Department of Culture (Ortega y Gasset, 1944/1974), the substantive unity of scientific disciplines (Jaspers, 1959), the 'Great Books' (Hutchins, 1955).

At the present time, proponents of the competence approach believe that universalization can be achieved by soft skills (universal competencies (UCs) – in Russia) as a fusion of supra-subject knowledge, abilities, values and implementation capability. Thanks to UCs, higher

education is re-gaining the (self)upbringing (value-based and existential) component represented by the attempt to find and unlock one's life purpose. Such self-upbringing as development of a mature (adult – following Biesta's terminology) person who is aware of his/her responsibility, capabilities and limitations can be, to some extent, compared with Biesta's 'subjectification' (Biesta, 2020).

Thus, UCs are responsible for balancing the universalization matrix, which was distorted during the Modern Times and has been used as such in university education, featuring the overdeveloped learning component and the downsized self-upbringing component. In the meantime, the adoption or rather the recovery (by using UCs) of the upbringing component by higher education entails a significant problem. Values intrinsically contain the ideological message of the groups whose preferences they represent (Expósito, 2020). Therefore, thanks to the competence approach (which, similarly to J. Dewey, attempts to overcome the opposition between learning and upbringing, education and socialization), higher education can be easily put into the context of ideological indoctrination.

On the other hand, this threat is offset by the fact that in the higher education environment, we are talking not as much about upbringing as about self-upbringing, which has existential rather than value-based significance, and also by the fact of duality of UCs (first of all, such as critical thinking): Although they are taught for preserving those social and cultural values that are prioritized by dominant groups in society, UCs' potential helps students challenge (perform 'the phenomenological reduction' as E. Husserl puts it) these values.

### ***The identity crisis and humanistic view of the purpose of education***

The humanistic approach to education stems from the idea about a certain integral human nature, which presently is brought into question. The idea of human nature as a stable and fixed substance has given way (having passed through multiple stages, including Rousseau's thought of perfection, Nietzsche's criticism of the Platonic-Christian tradition and Dewey's pragmatism (Dalbosco & Doro, 2019)) to the understanding of its vulnerability, multiplicity, and plasticity.

There is no metaphysically grounded concept of a ready-made human entity, which can be used to derive and construct the idea of education (and this undermines the positions of the classical university implying the importance of the unifying idea of the university and contributes to the emerging concept of the postmodern university (Smith & Webster, 1997) devoid of any intrinsic

unity and distinctive unchangeable features). Bauman (1995) describes this anthropological shift as follows: From the pilgrim, who knows his destination well ahead, to the tourist whose interest is fuelled by the randomness of the chosen path.

Education (including higher education) is between Scylla and Charybdis: Either it should move forward with the classical project of the exemplarily developed personality, which implies the uniform standard and the predetermined ideal, or it should focus on developing a person without any backbone and uniform identity. The first option can hardly fit into the contemporary period requiring flexibility and adaptability. This period is also characterized by an identity crisis, which has been extensively analysed in anthropological studies of Bauman (1995), Foucault (1970), Derrida (1992), Lacan and Levinas (Fryer, 2004), Rorty (1989), etc. On the other hand, the second option poses a risk of developing an excessively accommodative, “spineless,” many-faced person sacrificing not only ideals, but also elementary moral standards.

It would be highly advisable to offer an educational project where multiplicity of identity is interpreted as its many-sidedness contributing to multi-variant behaviour entailing the cultivation of responsibility for the selection of values and personal preferences (cf. the metaphor of learning as a navigational compass by OECD (2019) and Schleicher (2018)). In our opinion, departure from the notion of identity towards the notion of subjectification offered by Biesta (2020) is heuristic. Identity and subjectification correlate as uniqueness-as-difference and uniqueness-as-irreplaceability; as ontological and existential notions; as the third-person and first-person viewpoints, respectively. The notion of subjectification marks the overcoming of the egocentric position underlying the notions of identity and individualization, which have slight association with the relationship between the subject and the world, mostly focusing on the subject’s selfhood (as a psychological construct).

Although both the OECD and G. Biesta are guided by the present-day students’ demand for an independent choice of their *personality*, their role in *society*, their place in the *world*, their positions have some significant difference: G. Biesta dares to challenge the constructivist vision of free will, which prevails in modern education (and is promoted by the competence approach). Like H.-G. Gadamer, he believes (and we share his opinion) that it is important for students to learn how to be not only successful, but also vulnerable, to be mature not only in the readiness to take the risk, but also in the admission of limitations of their capabilities.



However, although the competence approach declares commitment to constructivism (according to which, the essence of education is to promote a free development of the student's potential), but in fact it closes the student into a rather narrow framework of the profile of an ideal graduate, whose characteristics are determined by closed catalogues of competencies (Gilyazova, 2022). The question is what should be done with the student who does not fit (cannot or does not want) into this profile? Should the student be made to move on and to develop the required skills and competences to comply with the established standard? That is what lies in the core of the competence approach.

In the meantime, such people as ‘nerds’ and ‘geeks’ demonstrate that to be high-performing and talented person or even a man of genius, a person does not have to be universally competent. In addition, the insufficient development of one quality (social and/or emotional intelligence) leaves room for development of another quality – cognitive intelligence. Considering that underdevelopment of some competences is not of health concern, causes no harm to the person and his/her social environment and, on the contrary, efficiently improves (through overcompensation) other competences (including those that do not belong to trendy soft skills), there is no reason for making the person go through destructive self-alterations. Instead of a ready-made closed set of competencies, would not it be better to accept that “in our rapidly changing world, it is impossible to know exactly what type of competence will be needed in the future”? (Jääskelä, Nykänen, & Tynjälä, 2018, p. 3). Not for nothing, Barnett (2012) notices a paradox in the fact that we prepare students better

for a changing world [...] by attempting to specify clearly the skills that are to be developed among the students. In short, we are confronted in this idea of education with the nonsense belief that we can generate human being for uncertainty through a new kind of certainty in the curriculum (p. 73).

In this sense, the competence approach is consistent with philosophical humanism, as both set the standard for a human being, cultivate a specific type (essence) of this human being and, therefore, automatically leave out those who cannot or do not want to match the standard (Biesta, 2014). The demarcation line separating those who fit in the established standard from those who fall short of it has not only philosophical and educational, but also social and practical implications.

In this way, the notion of ‘a human’ can be redefined (considering prospects of transhumanism, this situation is not as unrealistic). The consequences of such redefinition (as

demonstrated by Nazi experiments, the distance from ‘who can’ be qualified as a human →to ‘who deserves’ being qualified as a human is not very large) can be terrifying. However, in the very universality of UCs there is a desire to overcome isolation and predetermination of the ready-made list.

### ***Universal competencies and the utilitarian view of the purpose of higher education***

Talking about the utilitarian approach to education, the Fourth Industrial Revolution (Industry 4.0) has actualized it unprecedentedly. The world of work is undergoing fundamental changes: Routine (physical and vulnerable due to robotic process automation as well as cognitive and vulnerable due to computerization) operations are being replaced by the operations requiring social, emotional, and cognitive skills of higher levels, i. e. soft skills (Marin-Zapata et al, 2022).

The status of the diploma is also changing. As known, the diploma of higher education performs two main functions: Certification and signal. Both functions are important on the labour market. While the first function embraces mainly hard skills and professional competences, the second function refers primarily to soft skills and UCs, serving a signal and notifying the employer about the applicant’s qualities required for receiving higher education (and usually valued at work), first of all, the ability to learn.

However, massification of higher education creates the situation when the diploma (except for diplomas of some elite institutions), though still required, stops being sufficient for employment. Hence, diplomas in particular and the system of higher education in general have been devalued. There was a band-aid solution – adoption of federal educational standards, requirements for certification and accreditation of higher education institutions in Russia (Kozyrev et al., 2022). However, the administrative measures do not resolve the problem; without systemic changes, they can lead to falsification and simulation, substitution of actual actions with simulacra (following Baudrillard’s terminology).

Devaluation of university diplomas does not mean that higher education is not required, because, as Decker (2019) writes, “even with the financial and graduation rate drawbacks to higher education, the only decision more expensive than going to college is not going to college” (p. 2). However, being an imposed requirement (a mandatory document for job application), the diploma loses its screening function, especially regarding prestigious, high-paying jobs. Students have to resort to different measures to increase the value of their diploma for the employer. Such measures

include participation in out-of-class activities, taking additional courses to receive respective certificates – in other words, any activities, which can prove that students have both universal and relevant professional competences.

In Russia, it has been suggested that the accomplishment portfolio (showcasing academic and other achievements) should be used as an alternative to the Unified State Exam and the State Final Certification at higher education institutions (and be further used for submission to the potential employer) (Vaganova et al., 2020). However, even disregarding multiple questions (which are not trivial), how can out-of-class achievements be adequately assessed and rated? In addition, the key question is whether participation in out-of-class activities (avocation, creative work, volunteering) should be assessed, graded and made visible, considering that such participation is valued for its altruistic nature, privacy, and autotelicity. Shouldn't there be any areas of life, which are not included in school reports? The areas where the person is left to his own devices, where he is self-sufficient, non-transparent, and uncontrolled, where he can escape formalities, officiality and administrative control. The above reform will turn the Desired into the Must, thus depriving these areas of their appeal, ethos of freedom, spontaneous nature, autonomy, optionality, and, consequently, meaning.

Of course, not only students, but also higher education institutions are getting into the competition race for competences, as demonstrated by the fact that UCs have been included into educational programs. Scholars have identified several factors, due to which the agenda of 'preparedness for work' (primarily, through development of 'useful' (both general and specific) competences) has become imperative for higher education institutions. The factors include the diminishing of the autonomy of higher education institutions; massification of higher education entailing an increase in heterogeneity of applicants; and most importantly – the general trend toward its vocationalism and marketization. As a result, the 'teacher-student' relationship is turning into the clientele relationship (Donskikh & Logunova, 2019); employers tend to build their relationship with higher education institutions, acting as buyers of labour.

The growing demand for employability skills exacerbates the problem of mismatch between skills/competences and job requirements. Generally, this problem is reduced to shortage of these skills (underskilling), while the other aspect of inefficient distribution of human capital, namely, skills surplus (overeducation or overskilling) is ignored. In scholars' opinion, this type of imbalance leads to more adverse consequences, the most spectacular (and generating other

consequences) being “brain drain.” As shown by Maltseva (2021) and Hurrell (2016), the thesis about graduates’ skills shortage (first of all, soft skills), based on which employers (and the public) justify their complaints about higher education institutions, does not have sufficient theoretical and empirical grounds.

Certainly, such situations are typical not only of Russian employers. Hurrell (2016) (using his studies of organizations in the United Kingdom) refers to this situation as ‘the soft skills deficit blame game,’ pointing out that this ‘game’ tends to be focused on the supply (graduates, their families, and the education system) rather than on the demand (employers). Generally, scholars believe that soft skills deficit and gaps can be explained by poor personnel recruitment, screening, and training practices as well as by negative reaction to the job quality and, as a result, discontented employees refuse to use their soft skills.

### ***Universal competencies and intermittent socialization***

UCs represent the main advantage of higher education: Students are taught following the pattern of intermittent socialization (not continuous), ideally (by the example described in Bildung) as holistic individuals. Undoubtedly, continuous socialization, when the people’s experience gained during each stage of their life prepares them for the next stage, is highly efficient. The illustrative examples are athletes, circus performers, and people of art, who are engaged in training from infancy and become skilled professionals at a tender age. Such socialization is efficient in closed social systems (caste and estate systems), in the SPOD world where the professional path is initially and unreservedly mapped out. In more open (class) social systems and in the VUCA world, such strictness can be harmful: Any departure from the clearly mapped out trajectory can result in a failure – not only in work, but also in life.

Therefore, in contemporary reality, intermittent socialization is becoming increasingly important. It tries (using the universalizing matrix among other things) to cope with the disparity between an individual who has ‘a small absorptive capacity’ and the constantly growing collective experience. Intermittent socialization explains why, according to MacIntyre and Dunne (2002), “students who ask about their academic disciplines ‘But what use are they to us after we leave school?’ should be taught that the mark of someone who is ready to leave school is that they no longer ask that question” (MacAllister, 2016, p. 11). This approach also explains the wrongfulness of the intention to convert school/higher education institution into a supplier of educational

services, for example, under the pretext of the so-called ‘unbundling’ to reduce costs of education. In its radical version, such unbundling implies abandoning not only out-of-class activities (including political, social, sports and arts), which are seen as excessive luxury, but also the full-size curriculum that is going to be trimmed down to short-listed elements selected considering the prevailing interests of students (McCowan, 2017).

Education, as opposed to the ‘supplier-client’ relationship, which is seen as the model to follow, is aimed not as much to serve the needs of ‘clients’ as to help identify these needs, open new horizons, generate interest in what is unknown. These were the arguments in favor of significance of liberal education back in the 19<sup>th</sup> century: “It is sometimes thought that a student ought not to be urged to the study of that for which he has no taste or capacity. But how is he to know whether he has a taste or capacity for a science before he has even entered upon its elementary truths?” (The Yale Report, 1828).

In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, Biesta (2021) came back to this thought: “An important rationale for education is precisely to give students what they didn’t ask for, first and foremost because they didn’t even know they could ask for it” (p. 10). People go to school and university or any other higher school not only to get the desired (like going shopping), but also to move beyond the limits of the desired that is well known and to learn how to handle (mentally, verbally and physically) the desirability of the desired/the must. It is truly important, as teaching people to understand their wants and needs is, as Noddings (2003) rightly noted, controversial; even biological needs, which are exemplary in their objectivity, are open to interpretation by society.

Thus, the central drawback of intermittent socialization is rooted in the fact that the socialization experience acquired during a certain age period is of little use for the subsequent age periods (thus causing students’ frustration with the abundance of “useless” subjects and financiers’ intention to cut expenses on education). This drawback turns into an advantage, as students learn how to relearn, to adapt to change and to switch over to new experience smoothly and promptly.

So, UCs (like all soft skills) are ‘long distance’ competences. They are long-playing; they help actualize and upgrade hard skills. Thus, the attempt to adapt educational programs to short-term requirements of employers, as justly noted by Maltseva (2021), offers a flawed strategy to higher education institutions. UCs, which teach to how learn and relearn (throughout life), are more promising. They develop the ability to build a flexible professional trajectory and to move beyond the work boundaries toward existential matters of being.

## Discussion

In this paper an attempt has been made to outline the tension between two primary purposes of higher education in the context of the competence approach. Several Russian authors (for example, (Baidenko, 2006; Tkach, 2014) demonstrate that in the history of Russia, these purposes, humanistic and utilitarian, were institutionalized as two types of higher education establishments – the university and the institute. Such domestic and foreign researchers, as Collini (2012), Gerrard (2017), Rybin (2009), Star and Hammer (2008), claim that the convergence of different types of higher education institutions imply the trend towards overcoming the dichotomy between the traditional ‘enlightenment’ view about the mission of the university (generating and satisfying the thirst for knowledge and ambitions, developing reflective citizens and social critics) and the ‘down-to-earth’ view coming from the required development of employability. We join their vision of the situation and, for our part, consider it necessary to supplement it with our analysis of how the promotion of universal competences affects this dichotomy.

An extensive amount of literature (in particular, Dyachkova, Novgorodtseva, & Tomyuk, 2020; Kukkola, 2016; Shutaleva, Kerimov, & Tsiplakova, 2019) is devoted to the problem of promoting of the traditional mission of universities. We agree with the opinion of these scientists about the need for this promotion, but we do not share their pessimism about the obstacles on this road. According to our analysis, there are modest grounds for optimism: It is UCs that become a suitable innovative tool for promotion of the traditional humanistic and universalizing mission of universities, though outside the purely university education and on the new (more ‘down-to-earth’) grounds. In this way, UCs help higher education institutions protect themselves from any risk of ‘unbundling’ and also being turned into ‘big vocational schools,’ which is inherent in such trends of higher education as internationalization, professionalization and massification as well as the adoption of the narrowly-defined competence approach. This is consistent with the results of the studies by Binkovskaya and Maltsev (2021), Drobotenko (2021), Maltseva (2021), McCowan (2017). To many, the competence approach is the prescribed panacea for higher education (for example, Rychen, 2016; Schleicher, 2018; Trilling & Fadel, 2009), while others see it as a ‘cargo cult’ (Biesta, 2015; Kayumov, 2017). We insist on a more balanced position.

In this sense, Gerrard (2017) rightly points out that the binary opposition between the skills required for developing highly skilled and high-performing individuals and the skills required for developing culturally enriched ‘wise citizens’ or, in other words, the opposition between

utilitarianism and humanism needs to be destroyed. We share this assumption and supplement it with our remark: Such destructive force can be found in soft skills (UCs), which perform utilitarian and humanistic functions, thus being an illustrative proof of falseness of this opposition. This allows us to conclude that UCs, by virtue of their own nature, come up as integrators of both purposes of education and demonstrate that preparation of graduates for successful career and their development as well-rounded personalities do not clash with each other; rather, they constitute a dual mission of higher education.

### **Conclusion**

Our analysis allows us to conclude that the tension inherited from the Modern Times between the potentially conflicting purposes of higher education, humanistic and utilitarian, can be mitigated by the introduction of soft skills, key competences (universal competences (UCs) – in Russia). But for future studies in this field, it should be clarified that soft skills (or UCs) and the competence approach remain in the paradigm of the functionalist perspective on education, which sees it as a means of achieving extrinsic purposes.

This perspective is essentially reductionist, as education is narrowed down either to one of its functions or to instrumentalism, where education is an instrument for society's agendas. It will lead to superficial judgements if one believes that the humanistic purpose (thanks to UCs) inherent in the competence approach corresponds to the autotelic view of education. As in its pursuit to achieve this purpose, education serves as an instrument for society's agenda for developing certain integral and stable human nature (whose specific content depends on society's vision of the human ideal). Therefore, educational theorists and practitioners have a lot to do to restore the autotelic view of education, as it requires further studies in this field we have partially outlined in this article.

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