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Life purposes: Comparing higher education students in four institutions in the Netherlands and Finland

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ABSTRACT

Universities worldwide are beginning to counter the prevailing neoliberal ideology by paying renewed attention to the moral development of students and fostering their life purposes. This mixed methods study investigates the life purposes of higher education students in four institutions in the Netherlands (n_{Dutch} = 663) and Finland ($n_{Finnish}$ = 846). Based on quantitative data, we identified four purpose profiles: purposeful, self-oriented, dreamer, and disengaged. Qualitative data showed that students' willingness to contribute to a better world was not particularly prominent. An exception was found in the data of a Dutch research university working with a specific worldview and value base and emphasizing moral education. We conclude that universities need to put more effort into educating young professionals whose life purpose goes beyond their self-interest and who are willing and able to address pressing societal and global problems. This particularly includes professionals in the domains of technology and economy.

KEYWORDS

Purpose in life; higher education; The Netherlands; Finland

Introduction

In recent years calls for moral education within higher education have become more and more pressing (Han, 2015a, 2015b; de Ruyter & Schinkel, 2017; Veugelers et al., 2017). Major global crises such as polarization in society, climate change, biodiversity loss, pandemics and, most recently, the shaky conditions of peace in Europe, have increased the need for the moral education of (academic) professionals. The United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (United Nations, 2015) also contributed to a new sense of urgency to address (global) moral issues. Both Dutch and Finnish higher education institutions, the contexts of the present study, emphasize social, economic, and environmental sustainability as a pervasive topic in all teaching and research (Arene, 2020; Ministry of Education and Culture, 2020; UNIFI, 2020; Universiteiten van Nederland, n.d.; Vereniging Hogescholen, n.d.). Furthermore, education scholars worldwide argue that attention should be paid to how education systems continue to produce (moral) subjects who actually maintain the existing cultural and societal structures supporting

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unsustainable lifestyles, if change towards sustainable futures is to be achieved (Andreotti et al., 2012; Värri, 2018). However, neoliberal managerialism in European higher education (Kauko, 2019; Kliewer, 2019; Rinne, 2012) with its guiding principles of competition, production, and rankings apparently attaches little value to moral education in universities—and rather sees it as an add-on, or as a personal enterprise for which university teachers do bear no responsibility (de Ruyter & Schinkel, 2017; Schutte, 2017).

For the purposes of this study we chose two countries, namely the Netherlands and Finland, which, regardless of their current neoliberal management cultures in higher education, explicitly aim in their higher education policies at moral development. In the Netherlands, higher education institutions are actually required by law to enhance students' personal development and instill a sense of social responsibility (Higher Education Law, 1992). They aim to educate students to become professionals who are not only critical, entrepreneurial and inquisitive, for instance, but who also have a moral compass to stay on course and act responsibly (Vereniging Hogescholen, 2015, p. 5; see also, VSNU, 2015). In Finland, universities aim 'to provide research-based higher education and to educate students to serve their country and humanity at large' (University Law, 2009; see also, University of Applied Sciences Law, 2014). In its strategy for 2030, the Finnish Ministry of Education and Culture (2019) states that Finnish education at all levels should help students to experience their lives as meaningful and to increase a sense of trust in society and within society.

In both countries, higher education aims to be meaningful for students' personal and professional lives. This mixed methods study examines Dutch and Finnish higher education students' life purposes with a focus on the moral dimension of purpose, namely, interest in benefitting others in their immediate surroundings, society or nature. The study thereby contributes to academic discussions on the realization and development of moral education in higher education and the role of life purposes in this context.

Life purpose in moral education

Our study builds on the conceptualization of purpose by Damon et al. (2003), which is defined as 'a stable and generalized intention to accomplish something that is at once meaningful to the self and of consequence to the world beyond the self' (p. 121). This definition comprises three dimensions. Firstly, purpose is a personally meaningful *intention*, a goal to which one is committed on a long-term basis. Purpose is thus broader and more profound than short-term and daily aims. Secondly, purpose includes *engagement* with planning and realization so that the intention can be accomplished; in other words, purpose is not just dreaming, but means dedicated actions. Thirdly, purpose has a dimension *beyond the self*—it is not (only) self-focused, but (also) concerns others. When compared to other concepts, the first and second dimensions of the definition proposed by Damon et al. resemble concepts like 'ultimate concerns', 'personal strivings' (Emmons, 1999) and 'life goals' (Roberts & Robins, 2000). But the third dimension beyond the self distinguishes the definition by Damon et al. from others and 'places life purpose on a moral spectrum' (Moran, 2017, p. 232).

A mature purpose indicating that all three dimensions are present in a person's life purpose does not necessarily ensure that person's moral maturity (Colby, 2020). Han (2015a) refers to a well-adjusted gang member and Damon et al. (2003) mention Hitler as

examples of people with ignoble and immoral purposes. Thus, 'the potential for morally misguided purpose means that educating for purpose has to go hand-in-hand with educating toward moral growth, addressing developmental goals such as humility, wisdom, regard for truth, and enduring faith in fundamental moral principles' (Colby, 2020, p. 26). If this succeeds, purpose could be compared to a moral virtue. We do not agree with Han's (2015a) idea that purpose is a moral virtue *per se*.[1] However, we do find it important that people's purpose in life also subsumes moral purpose (or one's purpose should be morally acceptable).

Purpose in life has invariably been found to have a positive impact on human well-being (see Bronk, 2014 for a review; Sumner et al., 2018), on resilience when facing crises and challenges (Frankl, 1985), as well as on perseverance in academic learning (Yeager et al., 2014). We argue in line with Han (2015a, 2015b), Kristjánsson (2017) and de Ruyter (2004, 2015) that purpose is essential to live a good life.[2] Hence, it is worth asking how higher education institutions (can) support the life purposes of students pursuing their studies in the midst of the global crises of our time.

Developmental nature of purpose

Following the conception of purpose of Damon et al. in our research, two (types of) categorizations were used to study how purpose develops, namely purpose profiles and purpose orientations. *Purpose profiles* indicate how the three dimensions of the definition of purpose manifest. A *purposeful* profile implies a mature purpose in which all dimensions are present and in which the individual has found long-term intentions entailing a commitment to contribute beyond the self. In other profiles one or two dimensions are missing and are therefore seen as precursor forms. *Self-oriented* profiles entail a committed long-term goal, but without the beyond-the-self-interest dimensions. People profiled as *dreamers* have not found a purpose or any commitment to it, but they may have ideals and hopes to make the world a better place. *Dabblers* are highly motivated on activities and even to contribute to the benefit of others, but lack long-term intentions and commitment. While in a *disengaged* profile none of the above dimensions are met (Damon, 2008; Moran, 2009).

Purpose orientation refers to the object or direction of a person's purpose, in other words how the beyond-the-self dimension of purpose manifests (Kuusisto & Tirri, 2021; Tirri & Kuusisto, 2022). People can find purpose by caring for themselves (self-orientation), for others (other orientation) or by striking a balance between the two, when they are not interested solely in their own well-being.

While most purpose studies have been conducted in the USA by researchers from Damon's group (e.g., Kendall Cotton Bronk, Matthew Bundick, Heather Malin, Jenni Menon Mariano, Seana Moran, Kirsi Tirri, Brandy Quinn), this field of study has become increasingly international (see special issues of the *Journal of Moral Education*: Moran, 2017, 2018). We know from earlier studies that purpose develops notably in adolescence and young adulthood (Bronk, 2014; Colby et al., 2003). The college years are particularly important since university studies support other-focused purposes as universities provide new perspectives and opportunities to contribute to the community and society (Hill et al., 2010; Malin, 2022; Malin et al., 2013; Moran, 2009). Career paths and the degree programs of caring

professions, such as teaching or nursing, may offer more structured opportunities for the development of other-focused purposes than some other domains (Malin, 2022; Malin et al., 2013). Business studies, for example, seems to support selfish motives (Marathe et al., 2020). The same seems to be true of technology studies. It has been challenging to include topics, for example, related to sustainability into the curriculum and to motivate students to embrace them (Hilty & Huber, 2018). However, the degree programs of caring professions may likewise not always promote beyond-the-self orientations, nor do they attract students with such aspirations. For instance, according to recent studies, Finnish student teachers (Kuusisto & Tirri, 2021) and social services students (Manninen et al., 2018) mainly expressed goals with self-benefitting underpinnings as meaningful to them. In a Dutch study, too, the data indicated stronger self-orientation in written responses than answers in tick-a-box type questions (Kuusisto & Schutte, 2022). Research has also revealed that across countries the pursuit of self-oriented aspirations is increasing among young people (Moran, 2017, 2018, 2019), including in collectivist-oriented countries such as Iran and China (Hedayati et al., 2017; Jiang & Gao, 2018). The increase in self-orientation cannot be separated from the negative impact on students of neoliberalism, involving increased debt, stress, anxiety and mental health issues, as students struggle to find their place in a commercially oriented society (Desierto & de Maio, 2020). Simultaneously, it seems that higher education as a developmental context is bidirectional, indicating that students both develop their own sense of purpose during their studies but also select their institution and study domains according to what they believe these institutions can offer them in terms of a sense of purpose (Malin, 2022).

Studies conducted in the United States, Finland and the Netherlands report that a majority of college students have found a purpose in life (Kuusisto & Schutte, 2022; Kuusisto & Tirri, 2021; Malin, 2022; Manninen et al., 2019; Moran, 2009; Tirri & Kuusisto, 2016), but somewhat different results are found with different methods. In qualitative research, American college students most often represented purposeful and self-oriented profiles (Moran, 2009). In American and Dutch quantitative studies, the majority of college students were identified as dreamers or as purposeful (Kuusisto & Schutte, 2022; Malin, 2022), whereas in quantitative Finnish studies, most students were identified as dabblers[3] or as purposeful (Manninen et al., 2019; Tirri & Kuusisto, 2016). The profiles of disengaged or drifting students were less frequently identified, indicating that college students are possibly less at risk of marginalization (Damon, 2008). Also, students in different study areas have different purpose profiles: students in the STEM (science, technology, engineering, mathematics) and business domains seem to be mainly self-oriented or drifters, while students in social professions or theology majors are more likely to be purposeful (Malin, 2022; Tirri & Kuusisto, 2016).

Studies on life purpose among European higher education students are so far relatively scarce; however, the effort of higher education institutions to support the development of their students' personal and professional purposes could be supported by this line of research. Our study thus aims to continue to shed light on this topic by comparing data sets from the Netherlands and Finland by answering the main research question 'What

characterizes the life purposes of Dutch and Finnish students in four higher education institutions?', and three sub-questions:
(RQ1) What purpose profiles can be identified among Dutch and Finnish students? (*Quantitative data*)
(RQ2) How does the beyond-the-self dimension (self-orientation or other orientation) manifest in students' thinking? (*Qualitative data*)
(RQ3) How do students in different institutions and study domains differ in terms of their purpose profiles and manifestations of the beyond-the-self dimension? (*Quantitative and qualitative data*)

Based on the studies described above, our hypotheses are:
(H1) Purposeful and dreamer profiles predominate among higher education students.
(H2) Self-orientation is emphasized in students' life purposes manifested in written responses.
(H3) Students of social and education sciences are more purposeful than students in the business and technology domains.

Method

Procedure

Data were gathered at one university in each country (University of Humanistic Studies [UHS], Faculty of Education and Culture at Tampere University [EDU]) and also from one university of applied sciences (Hanze University of Applied Sciences [HUAS],[4] Tampere University of Applied Sciences [TAMK]). Table 1 presents some background information on the institutions. The respondents at the universities studied humanities, social and education sciences; at the universities of applied sciences our sample included students from several fields. Permission for the research was granted by all institutions. Participants were asked to give their informed consent and responded to either a paper-

Table 1. Participating higher education institutes.

	The Netherlands	Finland
Research universities (RU) Domain: Humanities, social, educational sciences UHS and EDU are ERASMUS-partners.	**University of Humanistic Studies** (UHS) • Small independent, denominational university with 750 students • A strong civic and humanistic value orientation • Students graduate as humanistic chaplains, ethical experts, and teachers of citizenship education	**Unit of Education, Tampere University** (EDU) • Small unit with 1500 students • Aims to educate changemakers who are socially and culturally aware experts in education • Students graduate as teachers of early childhood education, basic and secondary education, and educational experts
Universities of Applied Sciences (UAS) Several domains HUAS and TAMK are strategic partners.	**Hanze University of Applied Sciences** (HUAS) • Large institution with 28.000 students • Aims to be engaged university by embracing sustainability goals • Offering comprehensive education in several domains	**Tampere University of Applied Sciences** (TAMK) • Large institution with 13.000 students • The first Finnish UAS to sign the international sustainable development agreement in October 2020 • Offers comprehensive education in several domains

Table 2. Background of the participants.

	The Netherlands		Finland		
Country	n = 663		n = 846		
Institution*	UHS n = 231	HUAS n = 432	EDU n = 563	TAMK n = 283	In total N = 1509
Gender					
Female	183 (79%)	241 (56%)	494 (87%)	187 (66%)	1105 (73%)
Male	44 (19%)	189 (44%)	65 (11.5%)	93 (33%)	391 (24%)
Other	4 (2%)	2 (0.5%)	4 (1%)	3 81%)	13 (1%)
Domain					
Humanities, Social and Educational sciences	231 (100%)	53 (12%)	563 (100%)	7 (3%)	831 (55%)
Economics		179 (41%)		100 (35%)	279 (18.5%)
Technology		118 (27%)		87 (31%)	215 (14%)
Health		61 (14%)		87 (31%)	161 (11%)
Creative arts**		20 (5%)		2 (1%)	22 (1.5%)
Age	M = 25.17 (SD = 7.86) min 17, max 62	M = 21.47 (SD = 3.17) min 14, max 52	M = 26.58 (SD = 7.28) min 19, max 58	M = 25.19 (SD = 7.24) min 18, max 56	M = 24.64 (SD = 6.80) min 14, max 62

*Open university students or visiting students were removed from the data
**Creative arts students were included into social sciences students.

and-pen version or an online version of the survey during lectures or as a pre-task for a lecture or a course.

Participants

The data included 1,509 students ($n_{Dutch} = 663$, $n_{Finnish} = 846$). In both countries, students at the universities were studying humanities, social and education sciences, and at the universities of applied sciences they were studying technology, economics, health, social and education sciences, and also creative arts. In all institutions, the majority of participants were female and the mean age was around 25, except at HUAS, where students were younger with a mean age of 21 (See, Table 2).

Instruments and analyses

Quantitative data

The three dimensions of purpose identified by Damon et al. (2003) as *intention, engagement* and *beyond the self*, were measured with the scales proposed by Bundick et al. (2006) and further developed by Bronk et al. (2018). The first dimension, *intention*, was studied with five items from the *Presence of Purpose* scale (1 = absolutely untrue, 7 = absolutely true) from the Meaning in Life Questionnaire (MLQ) that assesses a sense of purpose in one's life (Steger et al., 2006). The second dimension, *engagement*, was measured with five items from the Purpose in Life scale (PIL) that addresses planning and actualization of a purpose (1 = not at all important, 7 = extremely important; Ryff, 1989). The third dimension, *beyond the self*, was measured with four items from the Claremont Purpose Scale (CPS) that covers interest in making the world a better place

(1 = almost never/not at all important, 5 = almost all the time/extremely important; Bronk et al., 2018). Items in English can be found in the Appendix.[5] Relatively high alpha values indicated that the reliabilities of all scales were on a good level in both the Dutch and Finnish data (*intention* α_{Dutch} = .853, $\alpha_{Finnish}$ = .890; *engagement* α_{Dutch} = .710, $\alpha_{Finnish}$ = .738; *beyond the self* α_{Dutch} = .854, $\alpha_{Finnish}$ = .826).

To study the validity of the scales further, we computed confirmatory factor analyses (CFA) for the three dimensions of purpose in the Mplus 8.0 program (Muthén & Muthén, 1998–2017) for each of the four institutions and two countries separately. The goodness-of-fit values of the CFAs can be found in the Appendix. Absolute fit indices (RMSEA, SRMR) as well as incremental fit measures (CFI, TLI) indicated a good and reasonable fit for all models (Byrne, 2012).

K-means cluster analysis was chosen for person-based grouping. This is an explorative method and an enduring strategy in clustering people (Jain, 2010). Analyses were conducted in SPSS separately for both countries, ten iterations were needed in the Dutch data and 25 for the Finnish data. Variables were standardized due to variation in scales. Models with three, four and five profiles were tested and four-profile models turned out to be theoretically the soundest solution in both countries (Naes et al., 2010). One-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) was computed to detect differences between profiles in relation to the three dimensions of purpose.

Qualitative data

The qualitative data in the present study included students' responses to the open-ended question: 'What do you think is your life purpose, or the closest thing you have to a life purpose?' (Magen, 1998; Moran, 2014). To identify their purpose orientations, i.e., manifestations of the beyond-the-self dimension, statements were coded deductively (Elo & Kyngäs, 2008) in Excel following the strategy and notions of Kuusisto and Tirri (2021): All different content categories may reflect self or other-orientation or both. For example, a student who wrote that her purpose was to have a family meant that this person wanted something for herself, thus reflecting *self-orientation*. Another student reporting her purpose as supporting her family and helping her children to have a good life, reflected *other-orientation* related to family. Furthermore, responses indicating no sense of purpose were categorized as *disengaged orientation*. Some students did not describe their purpose in life at all, and these were also marked. Kappa values were calculated for ten percent of the data in both countries to measure inter-rater reliabilities among coders. Good to excellent level Kappa values were achieved (.664—.973; McHugh, 2012).

Tests and triangulation

To study and triangulate quantitative and qualitative results with background variables, we utilized crosstabulations and Chi-square tests to investigate how purpose profiles (quantitative data) and purpose orientations (beyond-the-self dimension in qualitative data) were associated with the students' institutions and study domains. Standardized residuals were scrutinized to identify which groups contributed to statistically significant results in the Chi-square test by utilizing the 'greater-than-two rule of thumb' (MacDonald & Gardner, 2000, p. 738), meaning that

a standardized residual with a value of |2| or more indicates a statistically significant contribution.

Results

RQ1: What purpose profiles can be identified among Dutch and Finnish students? (Quantitative data)

The first research question was answered by computing K-means cluster analysis utilizing three mean variables, *intention, engagement* and *beyond the self*, that measure dimensions of purpose (Damon et al., 2003). These three dimensions of purpose correlated (Table 3) statistically significantly with each other, which was theoretically expected (Bronk et al., 2018; Damon et al., 2003). It should be noted that *intention* and *engagement* correlated relatively strongly, indicating the closeness of these dimensions even though the CFA (see Appendix) revealed that all three dimensions are indeed distinct factors. The correlations were on the same level in all four institutions.

Four purpose profiles were identified and named in line with earlier studies (Damon, 2008; Moran, 2009) as (1) purposeful, (2) self-oriented, (3) dreamer and (4) disengaged (Figure 1 and Figure 2). The ANOVA showed that clustering variables (intention, engagement, beyond the self) differed statistically significantly across the profiles ($p < .05$) with medium to large effect sizes (Sawilowsky, 2009). The few exceptions are presented in Table 4.

Table 3. Spearman's correlations.

Dimensions of purpose	Intention	Engagement	Beyond the self
Intention	-	.603**	.111**
Engagement	.623**	-	.143**
Beyond the self	.115**	.111**	-

Dutch correlations below hypotenuse and above Finnish

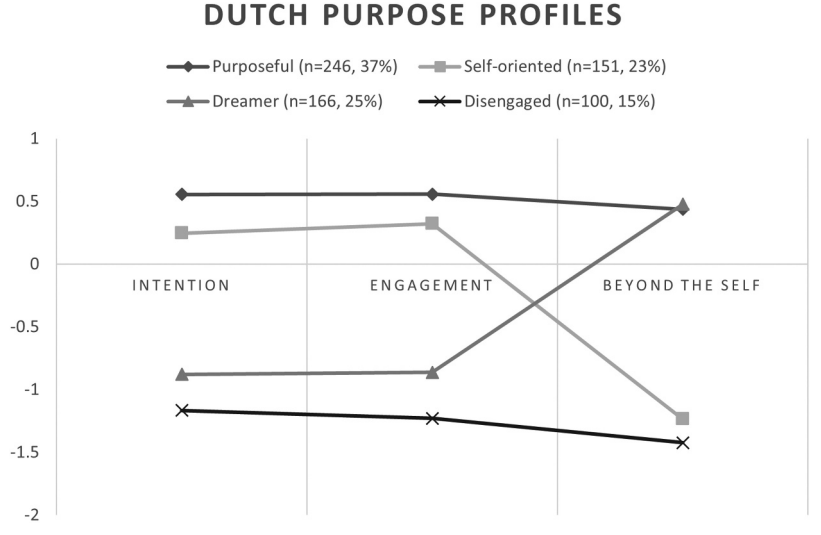

Figure 1. Dutch purpose profiles.

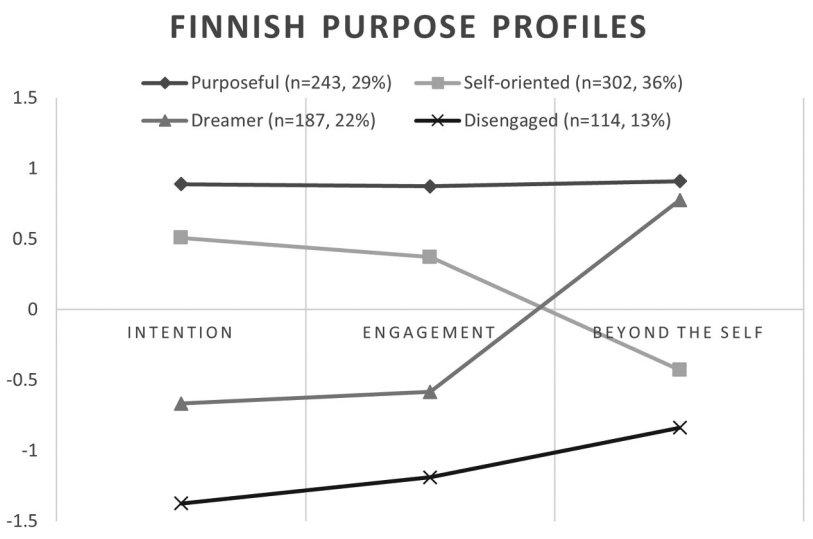

Figure 2. Finnish purpose profiles.

Table 4. Descriptive statistics of purpose profiles.

DUTCH PURPOSE PROFILES Dimensions of purpose	Purposeful *n* = 246 (37%) *M (SD)*	Self-oriented *n* = 151 (23%) *M (SD)*	Dreamer *n* = 166 (25%) *M (SD)*	Disengaged *n* = 100 (15%) *M (SD)*	ANOVA *F(df), p,* η_p^2
Intention					
Scale 1–7	5.51 (.71)	5.12 (.85)	3.69 (.89)	3.32 (.80)	280.655(3)***
z-score	.56 (.56)	.25 (.67)	−.88 (.70)	−1.17(.63)	.561
Engagement					
Scale 1–7	5.57 (.63)	5.35 (.64)	4.18 (.75)	3.82 (.677)	251.012(3)***
z-score	.56 (.65)	.32 (.65)	−.86 (.77)	.1.22 (.69)	.533
Beyond-the-self					
Scale 1–5	2.67 (.53)	2.67 (.53)	4.03 (.46)	2.52 (.55(	419.997(3)***
z-score	.44 (.58)	−1.23 (.67)	.48 (.59)	−1.42 (.69)	.657
FINNISH PURPOSE PROFILES Dimensions of purpose	Purposeful *n* = 243 (29%) *M (SD)*	Self-oriented *n* = 302 (36%) *M (SD)*	Dreamer *n* = 187 (22%) *M (SD)*	Disengaged *n* = 114 (13.5%) *M (SD)*	
Intention					
Scale 1–7	5.93 (.68)	5.46 (.72)	3.96 (.89)	3.05 (1.0)	480.412(3)***
z-score	.89 (.53)	.51 (.57)	−.67 (.70)	−1.37 (.78)	.631
Engagement					
Scale 1–7	5.87 (.57)	5.38 (.59)	4.45 (.96)	3.86 (.77)	329.975(3)***
z-score	.87 (.59)	.37 (.61)	−.58 (.78)	−1.89 (.79)	.540
Beyond-the-self					
Scale 1–5	4.48 (.42)	3.31 (.44)	4.37 (.43)	2.99 (.64)	416.638(3)***
z-score	−.83 (.81)	−.43 (.55)	.78 (.55)	−.84 (.81)	.597

*** $p < .001$, Pairwise comparisons were statistically significant between all profiles within each country, except in Beyond the self dimension between following profiles: Dutch Disengaged and Self-oriented, Dutch Dreamer and Purposeful, and Finnish Purposeful and Dreamer ($p > .05$).

Purposeful (n_{Dutch} = 246, 37%; $n_{Finnish}$ = 243, 29%) was the most typical profile for Dutch students and the second most typical for Finnish students. Purposeful students scored high on all dimensions, indicating a mature purpose: this meant that they had found meaningful intentions, were engaged in pursuing them, and wanted to contribute to the world or people beyond the self. A *self-orientated* profile was also typical—even

more so among Finnish students (n_{Dutch} = 151, 23%; $n_{Finnish}$ = 302, 36%). Self-oriented students were found to have meaningful aspirations to engage with themselves while they were not equally interested in contributing to the benefit of others. In both countries, over 20% of students were categorized as *dreamers* (n_{Dutch} = 166, 25%; $n_{Finnish}$ = 187, 22%). Dreamers scored quite the opposite from those with a self-oriented profile. They lacked a clear sense of purpose and engagement but expressed strong hopes to contribute to make the world a better place. In both countries a *disengaged* profile was relatively rare and was identified in students who scored low on all three dimensions (n_{Dutch} = 100, 15%; $n_{Finnish}$ = 114, 13%).

RQ2: How does the beyond-the-self dimension (self-orientation and other orientation) manifest in students' thinking? (Qualitative data)

The second research question was answered with *qualitative content analysis* conducted on students' written descriptions of their life purposes. Three main orientations were identified: a self-orientation, an other orientation and a disengaged orientation (Table 5).

Typical descriptions of purpose reflected *self-orientation*, meaning that students wanted diverse issues and aspects of life for themselves. They aimed to actualize their own interests and to have a good family and career for themselves, as seen in the following responses:

- Being happy together with my loved ones. (Dutch HUAS Technology student 20,197)
- Getting my degree, a good job and my own house. (Dutch HUAS Economics student 20,524)
- Happiness, including a family and a happy job, a good financial situation and good friends. (Finnish EDU Early Childhood Education student 30,690)
- To fulfill myself and live a life that looks like me. To be happy and content and to do the things I enjoy and dream about. In particular, I feel that one of the most important things in life is relationships. (Finnish EDU Class teacher student 30,285)
- To live a happy life, to do things I enjoy. (Finnish TAMK Healthcare student 30,481)

These examples indicate that these students are future oriented and mainly want to have a good life for themselves.

Table 5. Purpose orientations in written statements.

	Dutch data		Finnish data	
Orientations	n	%	n	%
Other orientation—Self and other/only other	291	44	262	31
Self-orientation—Only self	283	43	555	66
Disengaged orientation—No purpose	21	3	21	3
No answer	67	10	8	1
Total	663	100	846	100

Other orientation meant that students wished to serve, help or contribute to the well-being of others within their own family or more broadly in society or the (global) world. Typically, descriptions containing only other orientation were either rather generally formulated, for example, 'To do as much good as you can' (Finnish TAMK Healthcare student 30,710), or very specific, as the following examples show:

- I like to help people with questions of meaning and significance. People who get stuck don't know what they want, have difficulty with life questions, I would like to help them. (Dutch UHS Humanities student 10,095)
- To make time for my loved ones, to be a loving mother to my children and a caring spouse to my husband. I also want to work with children and help children who have difficulties in their lives. (Finnish EDU Class teacher student 30,550)
- Using my white privilege to abolish it and commit to the dismantling of other social power structures associated with it (patriarchy, heteronormativity, gender, etc.) (Dutch UHS Humanities student 10,236)
- My life goal is to ensure that we stay below 1.5 degrees centigrade global warming and that animals are given rights against abuse (Dutch UHS Humanities student 10,182)
- Become a marine biologist so I can look after the future of our environment (Dutch HUAS Technology student 20,366)

These statements demonstrate how the students' life purposes are related to their values and concerns about social and environmental sustainability, which were often linked to their desired future professions.

Generally speaking, we found that students often combined self and other orientations. They reported wanting to be happy themselves, but also to promote happiness in others or help others in some way while doing things that also interest themselves.

Some students indicated that they had not yet found a life purpose for themselves and wrote 'I do not know', 'No idea' or reflected on the question more philosophically:

- I don't believe that life has a purpose. Life is not a journey to something or an accomplishment with a goal. (Finnish EDU Subject teacher student 30,114)

Such statements were identified to reflect a *disengaged orientation*.

Among Dutch students, both the self and other orientations were equally frequently present (n_{SELF_Dutch} = 283, 43%, n_{OTHER_Dutch} = 291, 44%), whereas the majority of Finnish students ($n_{Finnish}$ = 558; 66%) only expressed aspirations that reflected their self-orientation. In both countries, students with a disengaged orientation were the smallest group (n_{Dutch} = 29, 4%; $n_{Finnish}$ = 22; 3%) which ties in with our quantitative results with respect to a disengaged profile.

RQ 3: How do students in different institutions and study domains differ in their purpose profiles and manifestations of beyond-the-self dimension? (Quantitative and qualitative data)

The third research question was answered by cross-tabulating quantitative and qualitative results with background variables and by utilizing Chi-square tests.

Table A1 shows the distribution of *purpose profiles* among Dutch and Finnish students in different institutions and study domains. Crosstabulation and Chi-square tests demonstrated that in both countries the differences between students of different

disciplines were statistically significant (Dutch data: $\chi^2(12) = 84.547$, $p < .001$; Finnish data: $\chi^2(12) = 71.594$, $p < .001$). In both countries, similar trends in the distribution of *purpose profiles* were identified: students of humanities, social and education sciences at both Dutch and Finnish universities were found to be more purposeful ($n_{UHS} = 104$, 45%, SR = 2; $n_{EDU} = 186$, 33%, SR = 2) and less disengaged ($n_{UHS} = 20$, 9%, SR = −3; $n_{EDU} = 51$, 9%, SR = −3) than their peers. Among Dutch humanities students there were also fewer students with a self-oriented ($n_{UHS} = 22$, 10%, SR = −4) profile and more students identified as dreamers ($n_{UHS} = 85$, 37%, SR = 3.6) than among their Dutch peers. Thus, Dutch humanities students seemed to demonstrate most prominently a beyond-the-self dimension profile according to the definition of purpose by Damon et al. (2003) used in this study. In addition, in both countries, technology students comprised the smallest group with a purposeful profile ($n_{HUAS} = 30$, 25%, SR = −2; $n_{TAMK} = 9$, 10%, SR = −3) and the largest group with a disengaged profile ($n_{HUAS} = 32$, 27%, SR = 3.4; $n_{TAMK} = 22$, 38%, SR = 6.2). Some differences were detected only in the Dutch data: Dutch economics students were more self-oriented ($n_{HUAS} = 64$, 36%, SR = 3.6) than other students and less typically categorized as dreamers ($n_{HUAS} = 32$, 18%, SR = −2). By contrast, fewer Dutch students of health ($n_{HUAS} = 9$, 15%, SR = −2.0) and social sciences ($n_{HUAS} = 10$, 14%, SR = −2.0) were found to have a dreamer profile than were other Dutch students (Table A1).

By cross-tabulating the results of our qualitative content analysis of *manifestations of the beyond-the-self dimension* in written statements (Table A2) with study domains, the Chi-square tests showed statistically significant differences in both countries (Dutch: $\chi^2(12) = 101.229$, $p < .001$; Finnish: $\chi^2(12) = 57.537$, $p < .001$). When standard residuals were inspected (see, Table A2), the results aligned fairly well with the quantitative purpose profiles. In both the Dutch and Finnish universities, students of humanities, social and education sciences ($n_{UHS} = 159$; 69%; SR = 5.7; $n_{EDU} = 204$; 36%; SR = 2.4) mentioned more other-oriented life purposes than did students at the Dutch and Finnish universities of applied sciences. Finnish humanities and education sciences students rarely indicated having no purpose in life ($n_{EDU} = 6$; 2%; SR = −2.1). A significant difference between the two countries was found: nearly 70% of Dutch humanities students' statements included a beyond-the-self dimension, while among their Finnish peers the number was only 36%. In both countries, technology and economics students' descriptions of purpose least frequently included an *other orientation* (Technology: $n_{HUAS} = 36$; 30,5%; SR = −2.2; $n_{TAMK} = 10$; 11.5%; SR = −3.2; Economics: $n_{HUAS} = 53$; 30%; SR = −2.9; $n_{TAMK} = 17$; 17%; SR = −2.5). Over half of the Dutch economics students ($n_{HUAS} = 97$; 54%; SR = 2.3) mentioned only aspirations which benefit themselves, and almost ten percent of Finnish technology students mentioned that they had not (yet) identified any purpose in life ($n_{TAMK} = 8$; 9%; SR = 4.0). These results align with the quantitative results of this study.

Discussion

Main findings

Global crises have renewed interest in moral education in higher education. We utilized the conceptualization by Damon et al. (2003) of purpose that highlights an individual's

willingness to contribute beyond the self as integral to developing a mature purpose in life. A beyond-the-self dimension brings the notion of purpose into the moral spectrum (Han, 2015a, 2015b; Moran, 2017), although we reiterate that it is also possible that one's efforts to contribute beyond the self may be non-moral (Colby, 2020; Damon et al., 2003; Han, 2015a). We investigated the life purposes of Dutch and Finnish higher education students in four institutions with a mixed methods design consisting of analyses of quantitative and qualitative questionnaire data.

The first main finding is that the majority of higher education students who participated in this study had identified their life purposes and were able to articulate them. This was evident in both our quantitative and qualitative data in both countries. We identified four purpose profiles that aligned with those identified in earlier studies (e.g., Malin, 2022; Moran, 2009). Most of the Dutch students were profiled as *purposeful* or *dreamers*, demonstrating a high rate of *beyond-the-self interests among Dutch students*. These findings were confirmed through Dutch students' written descriptions. According to our results, Finnish higher education students seemed to be more self-oriented than their Dutch peers: most of the Finnish students' purpose profiles were self-oriented or purposeful (see, Moran, 2009). Self-orientation was also strongly emphasized in Finnish students' written descriptions, which corresponds to the findings of earlier Finnish studies (Kuusisto & Tirri, 2021; Manninen et al., 2018). The results indicate that our first hypothesis 'Purposeful and dreamer profiles predominate among higher education students' was confirmed through analysis of the Dutch data but not the Finnish data. Our second hypothesis 'Self-orientation is emphasized in students' life purposes manifested in written responses' was corroborated, especially in the Finnish data.

However, these country-level differences should be interpreted with caution since students at the Dutch university (UHS) differed from those at the other institutions and their impact on the overall results in Dutch data was evident. If we were to exclude the data of UHS students, the Dutch and Finnish distributions of purpose profiles and orientations would be fairly similar. Our data showed that UHS students had the highest levels of interest in contributing beyond themselves, regardless of the data or method of analysis utilized. The UHS differs from the other institutions because it is explicitly grounded in a humanist worldview and value base, and states categorically that its main aim is to enhance 'a meaningful life in a caring and just society for all' (University of Humanistic Studies, 2017) through two main pillars, namely meaning-making and the humanization of society and the (global) world (Aloni, 2011; Veugelers, 2011). Compared to the UHS, the other participating institutions in the present study are more generalist. Moreover, in generalist higher education institutions most students seemed to have precursor forms of purpose and placed relatively strong emphasis on benefitting themselves rather than contributing beyond the self. This result may reflect the individualist ethos of Dutch and Finnish cultures (Hofstede et al., 2010) as well as the influence of neoliberal ideologies within higher education (Kauko, 2019; Kliewer, 2019; Rinne, 2012).

Furthermore, the difference between the UHS and other institutions could be explained through Malin's (2022) argument of bidirectionality. This means that institutions may have a specific and explicitly articulated value base and mission which may attract students whose personal life purposes align with those of the institution. Processes

of teaching and learning in such institutions can subsequently strengthen these students' own sense of purpose (Hill et al., 2010).

According to our second main finding, there are differences in the life purposes of students within different study domains, especially technology and economics students, compared to students in other domains. Our results show that among both Dutch and Finnish technology students there are more students with disengaged and less purposeful profiles than in other groups. Earlier research has also found that the technology domain is the most challenging in terms of students developing a life purpose (Malin, 2022; Tirri & Kuusisto, 2016). It appears to be difficult to implement courses that may enhance technology students' moral development (Han, 2015b; Hilty & Huber, 2018). For instance, Bourn and Neal (2008) mention five key barriers to and constraints on innovation in engineering education in the UK. An example is the senior teaching staff perception that projects which address social and environmental dimensions of engineering are less academically rigorous and favored by less able students as an easy option. In the present study, economics students in both countries scored high on self-orientation, which has also been found to be typical in earlier studies (Malin, 2022; Marathe et al., 2020). Thus, our third hypothesis 'Students of social and educational sciences are more purposeful than students of business and technological domains' gained support from this study, indicating that a study domain may have an even stronger impact on purpose development than nationality. This particular finding has been validated in value studies (Myyry, 2008; Verkasalo et al., 1994), which indicate similarities between purpose and value development in moral education.

Implications for moral education

Based on our results, we argue that developing beyond self-interest should be among the key objectives of moral education in higher education. Our results convey that the moral aims of higher education are still to be realized and that they may be easily overridden (de Ruyter & Schinkel, 2017) especially in generalist institutions. In this process, purpose offers an important and motivating aspect for moral education (Colby, 2020; Han, 2015a, 2015b; Kristjánsson, 2017).

de Ruyter and Schinkel (2017) suggest that there are four ways in which one can implement moral education in higher education: (1) *Teaching an academic ethics module* introducing the main theories of morality without any intentional formative aims with regard to student learning. (2) *Introducing students to professional ethics* in order to help students to internalize 'the normative ethics of their future profession' and professional moral obligations on a general level (p. 130). (3) *Promoting academic citizenship* by educating students to address their civic dispositions and by stimulating students to participate in community service activities. (4) *Fostering the ability to live a good life*, which means supporting students to live a moral life and to responsibly and constructively contribute in their personal lives and to society. The fourth can be regarded as the most important way to accomplish the task of supporting students' personal and professional moral purposes (de Ruyter & Schinkel, 2017; see, Arene, 2020; Ministry of

Education and Culture, 2020; UNIFI, 2020; Universiteiten van Nederland, n.d.; Vereniging Hogescholen, n.d.).

The fourth way also characterizes moral education at the Dutch university UHS that provided an interesting example of a higher education institution able to support and/or develop noble purposes contributing to beyond-the-self orientation in its students. Besides inculcating a theoretical understanding of humanization and meaning-making, the UHS offers students moral education with practice-based opportunities to enhance their sense of purpose by inviting them to personally reflect on their own values and encouraging them to question and comment on the existing political order.[6] By adopting the fourth approach, purpose could boost moral quality by ensuring that moral education is no longer an add-on, but an integral part of higher education.

It might also be worth conducting further research into the differences between the four purpose profiles and the consequences for moral education. For instance, dreamers could be especially stimulated to investigate choices and opportunities for engagement, through student centered pedagogies (pedagogies of engagement) such as service learning (Moran, 2017, 2018; Schutte, 2017).

Limitations

The main limitation of this study concerns the generalizability of the results due the particular nature of the institutions included in our study. For instance, the Dutch university UHS is a small independent denominational humanistic institution with a unique profile. This had a significant impact on our results, which therefore cannot be generalized to other universities in the Netherlands. Because of this limitation, we need to be cautious about drawing conclusions from this comparison.

Other limitations of the study are related to the cross-sectional sample in which the humanities and social sciences are to some extent over-represented compared to other domains. However, our results are in line with those of earlier studies, which speaks for the validity and reliability of the present study. By triangulating quantitative and qualitative datasets, we were able to gain a more holistic picture of the life purposes of these Dutch and Finnish higher education students. The results also suggest that in spite of some discrepancies between the quantitative and qualitative results, which is actually typical in mixed methods research (Creswell, 2015), the main trends are similar and offer a more detailed picture of life purposes among higher education students than would have been possible with only one type of data (cf., Kuusisto & Tirri, 2021). The measurements utilized in the present study seem to offer relatively compact and robust tools to study an objective as complex as life purpose.

Future studies

All in all, future studies with longitudinal designs, intervention research and qualitative approaches are needed to study possible changes in the purpose profiles of students during their higher education (see, also Malin, 2022). Intervention studies should be co-created by diverse university teaching staff and studied scientifically from the perspectives of students, teachers and institutions. Future studies could also shed light on the role

of pedagogy, such as at the Dutch university UHS, which may provide interesting contexts for case studies on purpose development and education. Since our results indicated that purposes and values may share similar developmental trajectories, more research is needed on the conceptual and empirical relations between purpose and values in moral education. Finally, more research is needed to investigate how life purposes and professional purposes align with educating purposeful individuals who wish to contribute beyond the self in their personal and professional spheres of life.

Notes

1. Han (2015a) suggests that purpose is a moral virtue because it meets the characteristic features of such a virtue: purpose as a long-term intention has a dispositional element like moral virtues; purpose contributes to achieving flourishing—the truly happy life (eudaimonia); it is also promoted through initiation and habituation. Most importantly, he suggests that purpose is comparable to phronesis and regards it as a second order virtue that moderates other virtues like a moral beacon or compass in line with Moran's (2009) characterizations of the purpose in positive youth development.

   We concur with Kristjánsson's (2017) critique of Han's proposal that purpose in general (or normally taken) does not necessarily have a moral content. This is also true of Damon's view: namely that purpose is beyond the self does not mean it is necessarily moral. Thus, to argue that purpose is a moral virtue requires that one has to limit the notion of purpose and limit it too much—namely only those forms of purpose that are moral. Secondly, Kristjánsson is not convinced that another meta virtue is needed: phronesis is sufficient: it 'orchestrates the whole virtue enterprise like a musical conductor' (Kristjánsson, 2017, p. 100). Thus, while purpose could be regarded as a virtue, it is not necessarily a moral virtue.
2. Increasingly, human flourishing (eudaimonia, happiness) is perceived to be the ultimate aim of moral education (Han, 2015a; De Ruyter & Schinkel, 2017) and (even) all education (Kristjánsson, 2017; De Ruyter, 2004, 2015). Defenders range from neo-Aristotelians like Kristjánsson (2017) to positive psychologists like Seligman (2002; see also Han, 2015a, 2015b).
3. It should be noted that Tirri and Kuusisto (2016) and Manninen et al. (2019) measured purpose profiles utilizing both Presence of Purpose and Search for Purpose scales from the Meaning in Life Questionnaire by Steger et al. (2006) in addition to measuring second dimension *engagement* and third the *beyond-the-self* dimension. They named the largest group dabblers who scored high on all measured components.
4. Data from Hanze University of Applied Sciences has been analyzed earlier by Kuusisto and Schutte (2022) who identified students' purpose profiles (similar methodology as in the present study). In addition, they analyzed the content categories of students' purposes and presented two qualitative case studies on purposeful students. Data gathered from the other three institutions has not been previously analyzed.
5. Translation of the survey into Dutch was conducted for the present study by two Dutch native speakers, and they were translated back to English by a person with native competence in both English and Dutch. The Finnish survey was adapted from previously validated translations (Moran, 2014; see also, Tirri & Kuusisto, 2019) or items were translated for the present study by two native Finnish speakers independently, whose translations were subsequently compared by a third scholar fluent in both languages.
6. For example, all students are expected to contribute to humanization in a public organization as part of their studies (15 credit points) during their Bachelor in Humanistic Studies and on the Master's Program in Humanistic Studies students complete a six-month internship, which is always in an organization aiming to assist people to find a meaning in life (e.g., as a humanistic chaplain) or build a humane society (e.g., a non-governmental organization).

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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Appendix: Dimensions and items measuring three dimensions of purpose and goodness-of-fit indices of confirmatory factor analyses (CFA)

Table A1. Dimensions, items and alpha values of three dimensions of purpose.

		Alpha values#					
Dimensions and items		UHS	HUAS	Dutch	EDU	TAMK	Finnish
INTENTION (Dimension 1)		α = .841	α = .861	α = .853	α = .885	α = .892	α = .890
MLQ1	1. I understand my life's meaning.						
MLQ4	4. My life has a clear sense of purpose.						
MLQ5	5. I have a good sense of what makes my life meaningful.						
MLQ6	6. I have discovered a satisfying life purpose.						
MLQ9r	9. My life has no clear purpose.						
ENGAGEMENT (Dimension 2)		α = .666	α = .735	α = .710	α = .735	α = .746	α = .738
PIL3	3. I am an active person in carrying out the plans I set for myself						
PIL5r	5. My daily activities often seem trivial and unimportant to me.						
PIL6	6. I enjoy making plans for the future and working to make them a reality						
PIL8	8. Some people wander aimlessly through life, but I am not one of them.						
PIL9r	9. I used to set goals for myself, but that now seems like a waste of time						
BEYOND THE SELF (Dimension 3)		α = .800	α = .845	α = .854	α = .817	α = .823	α = .826
CPS9	9. How often do you hope to leave the world better than you found it?						
CPS10	10. How often do you find yourself hoping that you will make a meaningful contribution to the broader world?						
CPS12	12. How often do you hope that the work that you do positively influences others?						
CPS11	11. How important is it for you to make the world a better place in some way?						

Table A2. Goodness-of-fit values of confirmatory factor analyses on instruments measuring three dimensions of purpose (intention, engagement, beyond the self).

	UHS (n = 231)	HUAS (n = 342)	Dutch (n = 663)	EDU (n = 563)	TAMK (n = 283)	Finnish (n = 845)
Absolute fit measures						
χ^2 of model fit	12.550	162.612	217.836	236.832	120.424	273.438
Df	74	74	74	74	74	74
p	.0005	.000	.000	.000	.0005	.000
RMSEA	.052	.053	.054	.063	.047	.056
90% C.I.	.035 .069	.042 .064	.046 .063	.054 .072	.031 .062	.059 .064
SRMR	.055	.052	.046	.055	.060	.056
Incremental fit measures						
CFI	.950	.954	.952	.935	.965	.949
TLI	.938	.944	.940	.920	.957	.937

Abbreviations:
n = Number of participants. r = Scale reversed.
Alpha-values were calculated for five MLQ, five PIL and four CPS-items.
MLQ measuring *Intention* (Dimension 1): Five Presence of purpose items from Meaning of Life Questionnaire (MLQ) (Steger et al., 2006). Scale 1–7 (1 = absolutely untrue, 7 = absolutely true).
PIL measuring *Engagement* (Dimension 2): Five items from Purpose in Life (PIL; Ryff, 1989). Scale 1–7 (1 = strongly disagree, 7 = strongly agree).
CPS measuring *Beyond the self* (Dimension 3): Four beyond-the-self -items from Claremont Purpose Scale (CPS; Bronk et al., 2018). Scale 1–5 (1 = almost never/not at all important, 5 = almost all the time/extremely important).
RMSEA = Root Mean Square Error of Approximation with 90% confidence interval. *SRMR* = Standardized Root Mean Square Residual. *TLI* = Tucker-Lewis Coefficient. *CFI* = Comparative Fit Index.
UHS = University of Humanistic Studies. HUAS = Hanze University of Applied Sciences. EDU = Faculty of Education and Culture, Tampere University. TAMK = Tampere University of Applied Sciences.