

The Tory Government distrusts the arts and humanities – but what about academics?

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The cover story of today's *Sunday Times* indicates a plan on the part of the UK government to reduce fees in higher education. According to the story:

He [Education Secretary Damian Hinds] revealed that future fees would be determined by “a combination of three things: the cost [to the university] to put it on, the benefit to the student and the benefit to our country and our economy”.

Ministers expect this to lead to dramatic cuts in fees for arts and social science courses, which universities have expanded because they are the cheapest to run and make them the most money.

Under the plans, universities will be told to offer: more two-year degrees; sandwich courses, where students spend time in the workplace; and “commuter courses”, where they live at home to cut costs.

Various **television interviews today with Hinds** and also **with Universities Minister Sam Gyimah** have done nothing to dispel such suggestions, though precise details are vague. **A statement from the Prime Minister is promised tomorrow**, though it is unclear how much has yet been decided, how much will be the outcome of a review.

There are various outcomes I could envisage, few of them likely to be positive for those working in the arts and humanities in British universities. The items on the following list are not mutually exclusive.

1. A re-introduction of the pre-1992 divide (though ministers will be at pains to stress how different it is), whereby the sector will once again divide into a series of universities in the traditional sense (probably the Russell Group and a handful of others) and others offering more vocational and technical courses (most of those which became universities after 1992 and maybe some others as well). This will be spun as entailing a new level of support for technical education, with the second group of institutions intended to be akin to German *Technische Universitäten*. The latter institutions will receive little or no support for research, and most lecturers will be on teaching-only contracts. The government money thus saved will be used to finance a cut in some tuition fees.
2. A push for many degrees, especially in the arts and humanities, to be able to be undertaken in two years, delivered by a mixture of lecturers on teaching-only contracts (whose increased teaching burden would leave little time for any research), casual academic staff without permanent contracts, and postgraduates.
3. A limitation of practically all government research money to STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, Mathematics) subjects, with nothing for the arts and the humanities, though the social sciences may keep some.

4. A variant of 3, in which all or the bulk of arts and humanities research money is only available to those in Russell Group institutions.
5. The introduction of a direct link between 'employability' (as measured by the Teaching Excellence Framework) and the level of fees which an institution is allowed to set.
6. An insistence that the majority of academic jobs be teaching only. Having a research position will then become one of the most sought-after things in HE.

Most of these measures, or some variants thereof, will be designed to enable the government to cut fees without having to pledge any more money for HE. I believe strongly in the abolition of tuition fees and re-installment of maintenance grants for all, but realise at present this is unlikely to be on the cards (even with a Labour government which pledges to abolish fees, but will be hit by the dire economic consequences of a Brexit they are doing little to stop).

The outlook for the arts is bleak, and especially for degrees in performing arts such as music, theatre, dance, or various types of spatial arts, which include a practical element requiring significant resources for appropriate facilities. Already, as a result of the introduction of the Ebacc (English Baccalaureate), there was **a five-fold fall in the numbers of pupils taking arts subjects at secondary school in 2015-16**, while other evidence points to **a special fall in take-up and provision of music**. When combined with other likely problems relating both to recruitment and access to research funding following Brexit, this will put various music and other arts departments in a highly precarious position, as some already are.

The arguments for the employment benefits of arts and humanities degrees have been rehearsed often, as for example in response to politicians such as former Conservative Education Secretary Nicky Morgan **dismissing arts and humanities subjects and urging pupils at school to concentrate on STEM if they want a better career**. I do not wish to dwell on these further here, not because I do not believe them to be true, but because I resent the debate always being framed in such narrowly utilitarian terms. Rather, I want to ask why many – including some in academia – have lost such faith in the value of the study of the arts and humanities *as an end in itself*, and are submitting to terms of reference which will always place them at a disadvantage?

In many continental European universities, there are **battles to save rare subjects in the face of declining student numbers**, but at least some measures are being taken to prevent these from extinction. It would be nice to imagine that the UK government (or the opposition) were backing similar measures, but evidence of that is in short supply. I wonder in how many other developed countries one would find a vice-chancellor of a major university **declaring the irrelevance of the study of sixth-century history, as the late Patrick Johnston, of Queen's University Belfast, did in 2016**. I refuse to accept that the study of early medieval (or ancient) history is somehow automatically less 'relevant' than modern history – or that the study of Guillaume de Machaut is less 'relevant' than that of Madonna. Any measure of the relevance of history in proportion to the temporal remoteness of the period in question ultimately undermines the case for the study of history at all. There has also been, in the UK, **a marked decline in foreign language degrees**, no doubt linked to **a decline in their study in schools**. It is dispiriting and more than a little arrogant when those in Britain no longer feel it important to engage with any of the world's many other languages.

There have been, and will be for a long time, heated debates about the value to individuals and society as a whole of various types of art, and especially regarding their purported humanising or civilising potential. Overwhelming evidence exists from the fascist era that individuals with a love for and firm schooling in high culture could still commit crimes against humanity. At the very least, this renders automatic assumptions of such culture's civilising potential impossible to maintain. But one need not subscribe to the views of Matthew Arnold (themselves more complex and nuanced than sometimes credited) in order to believe that a society with only minimal support for and education in the arts and humanities to be one which is deeply impoverished.

So what should be included in teaching and research of these disciplines? I would argue that at the very least, students should be encouraged to explore not only the forms of culture that they would encounter anyhow, but also those of different times and places, not to mention less familiar or commercially successful genres. Such culture can benefit from being examined in its social, historical, geographical, political, ideological contexts, without in any way neglecting its specifics and technical details, which are not merely the by-product of such contexts. The relationships between different cultural forms (between music and theatre, between theatre and performance art, between literature and film, just to give a tiny few obvious examples) are also greatly important, as are the relationships between culture and the intellectual environment of its time/place/social milieu, the societal functions of various cultural forms, the nature and demographics of those who partake of such culture and their responses (i.e. the study of reception), the economic situation of cultural production, the role of changing technology, and much else.

Yet so often I encounter the dismissal of many of these things, including by some academics, in ways which mirror government ideologies, despite being presented in somewhat different language. In the case of my own field, music: government emphasis on STEM subjects is mirrored in increasing emphasis on technological skills in music over other varieties of musical study and musicianship (and in the case of research, favour bestowed upon anything which has a contemporary technological dimension), as if musical study is somehow more acceptable when it has some of the veneer of science. Positions become available for the teaching of commercial music, or functional music for another commercial medium (such as popular film or video games), more frequently than those requiring expertise in a historical field, or in musical cultures outside of the Western world. I was recently informed by one Professor of Theatre that historical study of that discipline has all but disappeared except in Russell Group institutions (though am interested to hear of any evidence to the contrary).

I accept that some of this is pragmatic, borne of desperate attempts to recruit and maintain students who have less and less of a foundation in music and the arts at primary and secondary school than ever. But I am dismayed at how many embrace rather than tolerate this situation. There was a time when the study of popular music (**see this debate from two years ago on this blog**) could reasonably be argued to inject increased diversity into rather rigid curricula. At best, this can entail the study of many different popular musics from various times and places, critical interrogation of the concept of the 'popular', consideration of various social contexts, means of production and distribution, not to mention relationship to other cultural traditions, languages, and so on. But when it means limiting a good deal of musical study to

Anglo-American popular music of a restricted period (essentially that music which is already familiar to students), then the net effect for diversity is negative rather than positive. Ethnomusicologists ([see another debate on this blog](#)) eager to decry not only relatively traditional approaches to teaching Western art music, but also older approaches to their own disciplines which involved Western scholars spending considerable amounts of time in remote places, absorbing as best as they can the language, cultural practices, and so on, might reflect upon how precarious their own discipline might become if there is less of a place or welcoming environment for those interested in such things. The more musical study becomes simply about the application of a selection of methods derived from sociology or cultural anthropology to fields of musical activity close to home, the less reason there will be for institutions to support music as a separate field of study. The sociology and anthropology of music are vitally important sub-disciplines with multiple intellectual trajectories of their own, but if those engaged with them are housed solely in sociology and anthropology departments, they will then be in direct competition for students, funding and positions with the rest of those fields.

More widely, in many fields of cultural studies, especially the populist varieties which, as I have argued in some recent papers, are rooted in the work of the Birmingham School and especially that of Stuart Hall, commercial utility is equated with relevance, musical engagement is viewed as just another consumer activity, and research can amount either to conducting focus groups, or dressing up familiar informal chat about popular culture with a modicum of jargon. Any deeper critical engagement with popular taste, the latter empirically measured at one particular time and place, is dismissed as elitism. This amounts in many ways to an eschewal of arts education itself, and can lead to rather patronising ways of patting students and 'the masses' on the back simply for having the tastes they do, rather than encouraging them to venture beyond their comfort zones.

I do believe, after working in HE for 15 years (in multiple institutions), that most students who study arts subjects at university do so after having read some literature, heard or played some music, seen and acted in some theatre, looked at or produced some visual art, etc., and care about these and want to know more. They often seek help and guidance to navigate an overwhelming range of available culture, and also learn technical skills so as to be able to engage with this more incisively. Certainly not all will become equally drawn to all the manifold areas of study, methods, or emphases involved, nor could any realistically study all in detail in the limited time available for an undergraduate degree (for which I think we should be looking towards four- rather than two-year degrees, ideally) which is why we offer some degree of elective options. But I do believe it is important, indeed vital, that educators attempt to broaden students' horizons, encourage them to explore beyond what they already know, and also consider the familiar from unfamiliar angles. Those educators, with years of experience in their own fields, are in a position to facilitate all of this. Not through spoon-feeding, teaching-to-test, or rote learning, but introducing what to students will be a plurality new ideas, new cultural forms, new contexts, and encouraging them to consider these critically.

I also realise this type of humanistic approach may not be attractive or feasible to some potential students, and this situation is unlikely to change without wider changes in primary and secondary education. With this in mind, I would not rule out questions as to whether the removal of the pre-1992 divide has been wholly beneficial, and

whether a need to maintain the pretence that all degree courses are roughly equal just entails a race to the bottom for all. But technical colleges are not universities in the traditional sense, and it benefits nowhere to pretend otherwise, as argued well by Marxist scholar Terry Eagleton:

Just as there cannot be a pub without alcohol, so there cannot be a university without the humanities. If history, philosophy and so on vanish from academic life, what they leave in their wake may be a technical training facility or corporate research institute. But it will not be a university in the classical sense of the term, and it would be deceptive to call it one.

Neither, however, can there be a university in the full sense of the word when the humanities exist in isolation from other disciplines. The quickest way of devaluing these subjects – short of disposing of them altogether – is to reduce them to an agreeable bonus. Real men study law and engineering, while ideas and values are for sissies. The humanities should constitute the core of any university worth the name. The study of history and philosophy, accompanied by some acquaintance with art and literature, should be for lawyers and engineers as well as for those who study in arts faculties.

I would not like to live in a narrow, utilitarian, technocratic society in which there is little wider societal interest in other times and places, in all the questions which the humanities raise, or one in which such interest and knowledge is limited to the upper echelons of society. Nor a society in which art has no meaning other than as a form of commercial entertainment, as some right-wing politicians in the UK have been urging for many years (see **the notorious 1990 Westminster speech by then-Tory MP Terry Dicks**, and **the spirited and witty response by then-Labour MP Tony Banks**). And I doubt that this type of society would be attractive to many, especially not those working in arts and humanities fields. But if many of them are not prepared to defend the ideals of the arts and humanities, acting instead as advocates for narrowly conceived notions of social ‘relevance’, defined in terms of being contemporary, technocratic, and generally restricted to the place and milieu of them and/or their students, what are the chances of any meaningful opposition to governments who would happily slash most of these?

Universities, the arts and the humanities, are not just means to ends but valuable in their own right. Cultures and cultural histories are far from unblemished things, to say the least, but it would still be negligent in the extreme to let them fade into oblivion. And allowing students to retreat into the comfort zone of the already-familiar is damaging to global citizenship. In some ways, those who advocate such an approach to education are already doing the Brexiteers’ work for them.