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We can't stop the 'rip-off degrees' debate – but we can change its terms

Singling out particular disciplines makes no sense, but we need cross-subject standards that are recognisable to employers, says Ian Pace

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The UK government's commitment in the recent King's Speech to double down on proposals "[to reduce the number of young people studying poor quality university degrees](#)" provoked [widespread dismay](#) among academics. But it should also prompt some hard thinking.

The speech follows up the Prime Minister's July announcement of a "[crackdown on rip-off university degrees](#)", suggesting legislation will be attempted this side of a general election. The sector [might not like](#) the rhetoric of "rip-off", "low-value" or "Mickey Mouse" degrees, but a roll of the eyes is not an adequate response.

There is nothing new to attacks on the supposed lack of rigour and utility of certain degrees. English literature was an early target, described in an 1877 Royal Commission report as suitable only for "women...and the second- and third-rate men who...become school masters".

The appropriation of the term "Mickey Mouse" as a trivialising adjective can be dated back to the early 1960s and was soon applied to education. The journalist Adam Fox [recalls it being used about sociology](#) in the 1960s, and in a 1976 article on "[History of Sociology](#)", sociologist Panos D. Bardis argued in defence of such perceptions, noting that a survey of around 100 textbooks found them to emphasise "foolish fads, inane ephemerals, and tasteless trivia".

Media studies succeeded Sociology as a target, as noted in a 1993 article in *The Guardian* by Donald Macleod, which contrasted this negative perception with the discipline's growth. But it was during the New Labour era that the concept shifted to Mickey Mouse *degrees*, following a 2003 announcement by then higher education minister Margaret Hodge that she would [put an end to such courses](#) – though she refused to give examples. The following year, Michael Beloff, president of Trinity College, Oxford, argued that Labour's target of 50 per cent overall entry to university would result in "students from 'bog standard comprehensives' proceeding to take 'Mickey Mouse degrees'".

Such rhetoric, from politicians and in the media, has become ever more prevalent as both government and opposition grapple with a growing but financially unsustainable tertiary education sector. Mickey Mouse terminology is used particularly frequently by the [Daily Mail](#) and the [Daily Telegraph](#), while Rishi Sunak's comments echo earlier ones by levelling up secretary [Michael Gove](#) and former deputy prime minister [Dominic Raab](#).

Sunak's specific beef is with courses "that have high drop-out rates, don't lead to good jobs and leave young people with poor pay and high debts". Of course, those debts are for the most part independent of subject and, in effect, beyond the control of cash-strapped institutions that have no choice but to charge the maximum available fees simply to cover costs, while other debts result from the high cost of living, especially in major cities. But in difficult times, the debate is unlikely to go away, even under a change of government (witness Hodge's earlier comments). That academics themselves believe in differing values of degrees is demonstrated by emphasis of their own attendance of prestigious institutions and their careful consideration of the institution and subject of their postgraduate applicants' first degrees.

There are ways to engage with this dialogue but change its terms. The huge variety of provision across many subject areas means that classifying the value of degrees by subject makes little sense. Questions of rigour, breadth and depth and critical thinking, on the other hand, are valid measures of the value of courses and applicable to all types of subjects. There are, after all, many incentives for institutions to cram in as many students as they can and modify standards to ensure as few fail or drop out as possible.

As the duties of the Quality Assurance Agency are gradually taken over by the Office for Students in England, academics need to be active participants in developing robust new subject benchmarks to make meaningful the new [UK Quality Code](#). We need minimum standards that are recognisable to employers and are calibrated to ensure parity between diverse subject areas. The particular desires and priorities of academics intensely occupied within one disciplinary area need to be balanced against wider concerns about the value of higher education in general.

Yes, 15 months after graduation is too soon to assess employment outcomes, especially of those seeking work in areas that require not only further study but a certain period of self-establishment – journalism and some areas of the law would be prime examples. The sector needs to make this argument more strongly to government.

But employability is not a concern that can be easily dismissed – and it should not be, in particular, by academics who are Russell Group graduates and whose own employment prospects were, therefore, never seriously in question. Some very practically focused degrees in the performing arts, for instance, may not always be of maximum utility for students forced by job scarcity in those fields to seek employment in others.

Only by bolstering and enacting alternative measures of quality can academics prevent the direction of higher education policy being monopolised by those who hold many of their disciplines in contempt.

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