

The Guardian view on humanities degrees: art for society's sake

Editorial

To reduce tuition fees while providing top-up grants only for sciences would distort higher education. We need history, poetry and French as well as Stem subjects

Tue 12 Mar 2019

The number of students studying languages, including English, at British universities fell by 35% in the decade to 2017; history and philosophy saw a reduction of 21%. While some humanities subjects have seen increases – art and design, for example, is 6% up – these are tiny compared to huge rises in the numbers studying maths (26%), biology (47%) and medicine (11%). These figures provide essential context for this week's warnings from university bosses that humanities courses will be jeopardised if Philip Augar's review of post-18 education leads to a cut in tuition fees, as is widely expected. These subjects – and the knowledge, values and ideas they represent – are already in retreat.

The overall number of those studying for degrees has risen steadily since fees were introduced in 2012 and (though down from an all-time high of 1.2 million in 2009) stands at just over 1 million. This is progress. The alternatives to academic post-16 education have been damagingly neglected for decades, and it is fervently to be hoped that the review will make strong recommendations in this area. But improved training and financial support need not come at the expense of a higher education sector that offers Russian, drama and medieval studies alongside the more job-focused options of education, nursing and business. As we teeter on the brink of Brexit, British people need more knowledge of our own history and more understanding of other cultures – not less.

This is not to say that all or most people need to study humanities beyond age 16. It makes sense for the government to provide incentives and support for qualifications in areas where there are skills shortages. Complaints from business about a lack of engineers was one reason for the original push behind Stem (science, technology, engineering and maths). But for ministers to cut tuition fees from £9,250 to £7,500, as has been suggested, while offering top-up grants only for Stem subjects, would create huge pressure on universities to shift focus, and to cap numbers on courses in social sciences as well as arts.

There are several reasons to dread such an outcome. First, the evidence does not support this level of state intervention; research last year found that non-Stem graduates were just as likely to be in graduate-level jobs by their late 20s. Second, with caps comes increased competition for places, the effect of which is to shut out those with lower entry qualifications. When subjects such as history need to broaden their intakes to become more representative, and the continuing dominance of jobs in arts and media by the privately educated is widely noted, the last thing the UK needs is a further narrowing of access to desirable opportunities in popular subjects. Third, while boosting science education remains a good idea, and not only because of the expected economic benefit, the humanities matter too – even if their contribution is less easily measured in our instrumentalist age. The clue is in the name.

Expression:

1. 'British people need more knowledge of our own history and more understanding of other cultures'. Why does the author say so?

2. Explain the very last sentence 'the clue is in the name'
