

This Act of Cultural Vandalism

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Science, technology, engineering and mathematics are vital areas of learning and research. The loss of physics, chemistry and engineering departments in many British Universities has been pitiful to observe.

But the recent announcement of the funding for universities highlights the disastrous effects of the decision to prioritise these 'STEM' subjects. The cultural vandalism of the marginalisation of arts and humanities has been widely and correctly deplored. The effect on the social sciences has attracted less attention. Despite Britain's history of producing world leading engineers and scientists from Newton via Brunel to Hawkins the disdain for things you do with your hands has caused dismay at least since Victorian times. Currently, because successive Governments have abandoned manufacturing as the basis for an economy, this is manifest as a lack of suitably trained maths and science teachers.

There is a deep cultural malaise that needs to be addressed, but cutting the funding for areas of current strength will do nothing to abate this. Indeed it is research in education, cultural studies, the sociology of science and elsewhere in the social sciences that will help us address this issue. Simply announcing STEM will be cut less will achieve little if we do not understand the cultural and economic motivations of young people choosing a course of study.

This however is to give the most generous interpretation of Government funding policy. There is nothing as far reaching in their rationale. The Government holds a simplistic and instrumental view of the role of higher education. Their hope is that STEM research will provide easily exploited ideas and products for what remains of British industry; and in so doing they promote derivative research above innovative and original scientific thinking which will frame our lives and possessions decades into the future. This is the meaning in the scientific domains of 'research impact' which will be used to, to a significant extent, to determine where research funding goes.

I work at LSE where my colleagues are world leaders in the crucial areas of, to pick a few examples: child protection; financial regulation; government IT procurement; health service management; international human rights law; and young people and the internet. Many of my friends work at the Institute of Education researching, the often dreadful, effects of current schools and post-school policies. These are areas of study that are vital if we are to find ways of living better together. They are also areas that frequently provide ideas that are exploited in public service and private enterprise. If we did not train economists at LSE could we ever have a high quality credit crunch at all (however we also have to recognise that where scientific ideas are most enthusiastically exploited is in the arms and destruction industries – so both natural and social scientists have much to answer for). It would be rash of anyone to say we know enough about any of these subjects or that teaching the next generation about them is not vital for our social and economic future.

Similarly, the areas of arts and humanities are critical to most current visions of Britain. The media and creative industries are amongst the strongest in Britain and are where university research and teaching permeate and ensure high quality, popular (and even profitable) films, broadcasts, books and paintings.

The current HE funding round will make it more difficult for LSE and the Institute of Education, and all other social science and education faculties, to maintain their contribution to those social developments that are, or should be, the central concern of government. Promising streams of

research that will sustain community wellbeing will be abandoned; the education of highly skilled professionals will be throttled.

Even more than young people, adults returning to learning are able to make perceptive judgements about what and where it will be most productive and creative for them to study. Arbitrary promotion of the sciences will not help if there has been no solid basis of science and maths education in schools, interesting and well paid jobs to go to and a public culture that values science. None of those three conditions are currently present. Indeed a distressingly large number of maths and physics graduates worked in the City using their considerable and expansively developed skills to invent ever more complex financial instruments that spelled disaster for the world and British economies. Possibly one of the most convincing arguments for the huge investment in CERN is that if physicists had not been working there, they could have been performing real damage in banks and hedge funds of Canary Wharf and Mayfair. Promoting STEM at the expense of social science will not, of itself, help British productive industries. Researching and teaching in product design, project management, staff development, management of information systems and organisational change is at least as likely to assist – but not in the simplistic world of the Department of Business Innovation and Skills, as little attention to education in its title as in its activity. As Ben Goldacre says of science when deconstructing frauds and snake oil ‘I think you’ll find it’s a little more complicated than that’.

The skills learned in studying palaeography—the study of ancient writing—currently under threat at King’s College London are also useful in interpreting strategy documents or marketing plans. So palaeographers help firms and physicists destroy them; in our world, if not in the brave new world of Peter Mandelson.

However the diversion of funding is only one of the threats to the Social Sciences, research impact is the other. A key measure of research impact is the extent to which it influences policy. At one level this is common sense, getting research read and used by someone outside of a university is a desirable aim; at another it is deeply dangerous. If you research in an area of public policy the way to get your research adopted is to comply with the current orthodoxy and thus have great ‘impact’. Critical research that argues what government is doing is wrong will have far less ‘impact’. This is a chilling device for conformity. The Inquisition used the rack and the iron maiden for its framework, the British Government applies the Research Excellence Framework to similar effect.

Staking up a stem is vital, but unless the stem is well rooted in knowledge about social, economic and political conditions it will fall over. Equally, growing a healthy plant and cutting off its flowers and fruits of artistic and cultural production before they can be enjoyed is senseless. We need the whole plant to be nourished

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