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Nip & Tuck: The Humanities and Social Sciences under the Knife

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Nip & Tuck:
The Humanities and Social Sciences under the Knife

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Abstract

The British government has cut funding for teaching the humanities and social sciences by 100%. This monumentally foolish decision directed by Lord Browne – the former CEO of BP, who arguably has no connection, experience or qualifications to oversee educational provision – was implemented by the Coalition. Lord Browne's Report argues that STEM subjects; science, technology, economics and mathematics are prioritised as strategically important subjects for higher education, securing a sustainable future for them. Browne here seems to be suggesting that encouraging students to think, engage with critique, analysis and evaluation (as the humanities and social sciences do) is harmful to the longevity of educational provision. This is not only senseless it is restrictive to development opportunities and employability enhancement for young people. To imply that art, culture, language, history, philosophical and theological debate, interfaith dialogue etc. are irrelevant to society is absurd.

This ill-considered and very short sighted decision is extremely dangerous long term, and will have far reaching consequences. Indeed, we are already seeing the repercussions as consumerism and marketization take priority over education; Britain's universities are fast becoming the most expensive in the world – those that have not had to close down – impacting upon the social and cultural experience of young people and also their social capital and mobility.

We have all seen the 'botched' jobs of unqualified cosmetic surgeons and the long standing, often irrevocable consequences of the 'nip n tuck' that promised so much and gave so little. The consequence of these surgical attempts made by incompetent so-called practitioners cause severe anguish and distress at best and extreme complications, radical or permanent damage at worst. Basically, a negligent 'incision' not only causes long and far reaching damage, it is extremely difficult to rectify incurring unwarranted expenditure. Perhaps something Lord Browne should consider when he assumes the power of a would-be 'cosmetic surgeon', and rather than attempting a procedure he is ill equipped to deal with – cutting funding from crucial sections of education – he should leave the decisions to professional educationalists.

This paper discusses the implications of funding cuts to the humanities and social sciences and argues that government utilitarian reasoning is radically short-sighted. The humanities and social sciences are crucial to understanding society – past, present and future – and the complexities of relationships; local, national and international. Indeed, the humanities and social sciences are the foundations of democracy and therefore essential to understanding economies.

Keywords:

The humanities and social sciences have been part of the education system in Britain for centuries. Indeed, the UK has a strong heritage directly connected to these disciplines; they underpin the historical, social, political, religious and philosophical viewpoints, justice systems and economic structure of our society (Churchwell, 2013). The value of the humanities and social sciences within democratic civilizations cannot be overstated. Research undertaken within these disciplines has influenced the "social and economic impact of global issues … international security … business innovation … [and the] revising or refocusing of public policy" (Roberts, 2010:3). Further, social science research "informs and influences legislation, and it contributes to sound management and team-working across industry and public services" (ibid: 4). Moreover, the humanities and social sciences contribute to the national economy educationally but also by way of their contribution to industry; particularly the cultural and creative industries, and to social and cultural cohesion within the UK – specifically within government policies such as the citizenship or community cohesion agenda's (King, 2012). The role of the humanities and social sciences is also crucial within an international framework, these fields of study offer language and political expertise and also support religious, cultural and philosophical exchange (ibid). Why then, are these subjects being categorised as 'useless' by the Conservative-Liberal Coalition?

Brown recommended radical reform to the way higher education is funded; he proposed financial cuts to the higher education sector and the introduction of new fees systems for students. In 2010, as a consequence of Brown's Report, the Conservative-Liberal Democrat Coalition government cut funding to higher education institutions generally and to the humanities and social sciences completely (Belfiore, 2013). These changes have been made without genuine discussion or consultation, there was not even a pilot phase; the Higher Education Funding Council argue that such "rapid changes in policy can lead to unpredictable outcomes" (HEFC, 2013: 56). Indeed, such radical and sudden policy change has literally turned higher education into a commercialized market overnight. Student fees increased from an average £3,000 per year to anything between £6,000 and £9,000 – dependant on what the university deemed appropriate. Thus, students now accrue paralyzing debts estimated at £40,000 - £70,000 on leaving university. Congratulations Lord Brown, you have succeeded in making UK universities rank amongst the highest paying institutions of higher education in the world!

Further, and most damaging, is Brown's block cut to universities grant funding; in withdrawing this support the Coalition have basically abandoned any financial responsibility for higher education in the UK. The impact of this decision has far reaching effects; specifically dictating what subjects are taught in universities – that is if universities survive at all. Subjects have been ring-fenced and categorised: A and B banded subjects include science, technology, economics and maths (STEM); C and D subjects include arts, humanities and social science. The Coalition will continue to support band A and B subjects but will not fund C and D banded subjects. The government's stated objective for this is "to offer public and private support only to those subjects that

measurably increase the nation's wealth" (Churchwell, 2012: i). Basically, Brown has separated the education system into two distinct classifications; subjects that fit into a market driven economy v. subjects that do not. The former will receive government funding, the latter will not.

The exclusion of humanities and social science subjects is reinforced further by the government led 'employability agenda', whereby universities produce statistical data that details employment of past students; thus hypothesizing which subjects have the best financial return. Williams (2013) believes this is particularly damaging to students, not only because they can be swayed from courses they might opt for, but also because the university itself is supporting the transformation of a student into a consumer; thus altering the very nature of the student experience. Therefore, students making a choice – even though they may wish to study the humanities or social sciences – are more likely to opt for government supported programmes; those that Brown deems 'priority subjects'. However, and as Churchwell (2013) points out, education is not a means to make money, it is a means to make better people. "The public value of the humanities is that they protect precisely those values that the market does not. Of course we should profit from knowledge, but generating revenue is the least of that profit—not the measure of it" (ibid: i).

Surely market saturation is inevitable if all universities respond to the governments push for STEM subjects. How can universities sustain themselves, their student body and their future in the sector if they all attempt to provide similar programmes – a ludicrous situation? How can 'economic demand' dictate the continuation or not of any given subject? Indeed, who will perpetuate scholarly tradition to the next generation in say, as an extreme example, the anthropology of cultural folklore or Egyptology? These are highly specialized subjects that are certainly anything but 'popular'; yet, without the ongoing transmission of knowledge we lose valuable understanding of cultural heritage and the religious significance of rites, rituals and practices that inform present cultural traditions and attitudes. Indeed, Churchwell (2013: i) argues that "any notion of a public benefit from universities beyond the immediate needs of business is being completely jettisoned, along with the centuries-old tradition of the university as the custodians of cultural and critical knowledge".

Almost all universities are largely reliant on public funds and respective governments have, in the main, appreciated their ability to self-manage, pursue knowledge, extend understanding, ensure quality provision and promote autonomy – both in the university itself and within the student body. Therefore, previous governments have, in the main, allowed universities to govern themselves and set their own academic agenda. Indeed, universities are amongst the few institutions where freedom of thought and expression are nurtured, where open enquiry is encouraged, where future academics, researchers and scholars are shaped and formed. This is "not just an instrumental necessity for universities, but intrinsic to their character" (Collini, 2012: 8). The core activity of any given university is to transmit knowledge; even if this is in resistance to current political movements or pressures from any given government by way of policy, campaign or government party bias

(Fish, 2008). Fish argues that keeping academic functions distinct and separate from politics and the government policy of the day is the only way to maintain the core function of the university; basically, the only way to preserve the institution of education (ibid). Therefore, Fish advices that universities should not 'play the political game' and as a result reduce themselves to becoming a political tool or undermining the core values of education. This, however, can also be problematic; particularly if the university's "principal activities threatens to legitimate forms of enquiry that may run counter to the aims of those who founded or supported them" (Collini, 2012:7). In other words, the government has had little control over the function, rationale and development of universities – until now.

Like other subject disciplines, the humanities and social sciences contribute to the public good. Education itself is a public good! The whole of society benefits from this in the same way we benefit from a health service. As a national service of public good, therefore social good, it is crucial that higher education is "not reduced to a purely economic good" (Collini, 2012: 99). Sandel (2012) believes that putting a price on education (or any public good) not only corrupts the good service but also attitudes towards it. Belfiore and Upchurch (2013) further argue that viewing education as anything other than a public good is a corruption of a public service. They argue that "the current predicament of the humanities [and social sciences] and the education sector, whereby the introduction of market mechanisms has not simply changed the way in which education is being delivered, but has in fact altered the very notion of higher education as a public good, substituting it with the notion of education as a commodity to be traded in the market" (ibid: 5). This is completely contradictory to the university function of supporting students in becoming autonomous, rationalising graduates who can contribute to new, fresh, innovative ideas for future endeavours – not machines of economic growth. How do we progress as a civilised democratic society without free enquiry?

The humanities and social sciences do not need a justification for bringing excellence to the nation in terms of education. From primary school to higher education, these disciplines engage students in critical thinking, evaluation, reflection and promote independent thought and analysis. Indeed, the very nature of the humanities and social sciences is to nurture intellectual freedom and autonomy. The very skills that cultivate democracy, support humanitarianism, promote equality and acceptance of diversity is born within these fields of study. These skills sets, particularly critical reasoning, are exactly what businesses require in order to develop and expand within a global market. Indeed, Nussbaum (2012) argues that leading corporate executives value independent and innovative thinking within the workforce above all else. She further suggests that the greatest corporate disasters can be traced "to a culture of yes-people, where authority and peer pressure ruled the roost and critical ideas were never articulated" (ibid: 53) and that all undergraduates need the humanities and social sciences to enable them "to think and argue for themselves rather than defer to tradition and authority" (ibid 48). Belfiore and

Upchurch (2013: 8) agree with Nussbaum, stating that undergraduates, in the humanities particularly, are taught "critical thinking, writing skills, and conceptions of democratic citizenship essential to the professional and corporate works needed in twentieth century capitalisms modernising systems of management". Further, Collini (2012: 63) insists that the humanities and social sciences are disciplines that "attempt to understand, across barriers of time and culture, the actions and creations of other human beings considered as bearers of meaning, where the emphasis tends to fall on matters to do with individual or cultural distinctiveness and not on matters which are primarily susceptible to characterization in purely statistical or biological terms".

If policy objectives ever needed to be criticised, then the cuts to funding in the humanities and social sciences has never been a more appropriate argument to do so. Students, and young people, are the nation's future; they need to be equipped with the capabilities to rationalise, reason, reflect, evaluate, analyse and critique; indeed, the ability to identify the nature of any specific argument and then develop alternative perspectives is significantly important to any given society. These skills are fundamental to the humanities and social sciences and benefit the whole of humanity in more ways than simple 'economic growth' – although they do that too!

There is certainly pressure for higher educational institutions to serve the emergent knowledge economy rather than that of social or public good, which is contradictory to one of the main aims of any educational institution. Therefore, pressure is placed on the humanities and social sciences to produce 'economic commodities' that can facilitate profitable intellectual property (Belfiore, 2013) supporting government led initiatives that capitalise knowledge (Etzkowitz, 2001). Basically, academic knowledge and intelligence is being transformed into economic, commercialised and profitable commodities.

Moreover, and encouraged by the Coalition, the current fixation with league tables further undermines the core function of universities – quality teaching and learning! League tables not only provide insufficient and often incorrect data, but they seemingly set centers of knowledge against each other in competition. For example, the humanities and social sciences in university A v. the humanities and social sciences in university B. This is certainly damaging to cooperative nature of higher education institutions generally, but specifically to collaborative projects and scholarly activity. Collini (2012:18) goes so far as suggesting that "vice-chancellors now keep as nervous an eye on league tables as do football managers, and placings are frequently invoked to legitimate a preferred policy shift". Indeed, Belfiore and Upchurch (2013) ponder the reasons why university Vice Chancellors have not raised concern; seemingly they are more than happy to follow the commercialization of higher education, maybe for the profit margins, maybe not – who knows? Ironically, UK universities top global rankings in the humanities and social science (QS World University Rankings, 2015) and four UK universities are in the top six overall. Conversely, and in monetary terms, the humanities and social sciences bring a substantial financial profit to the UK. Indeed, students choosing to

study these subjects outnumber those opting for STEM topics; particularly international students (see HESA statistics 2014). Arguably, financial gain and economic growth cannot, therefore, be the ultimate reason behind Browns radical expurgation. What is?

Sadly, education is now seemingly not about education – it is about individual financial success and institutional financial profit. Browns proposal ultimately reduces higher education institutions to a "regulated market in which consumer demand, in the form of student choices, is sovereign in determining what is offered by the service providers (i.e. the universities)" (Collini, 2012:179). Basically, the student becomes the consumer, the university the service provider and the subject choice the product. Collini (ibid: 187) argues that Brown's report "displays no real interest in universities as places of education; they are conceived of simply as engines of economic prosperity and as agencies for equipping future employees to earn higher salaries". I can't argue with him.

If Brown's goals are realized, and education becomes a commercial vehicle in a market driven economy, then we will "soon be producing generations of useful machines rather than complete citizens who can think for themselves, criticize tradition, and understand the significance of another person's [situation and] achievements" (Nussbaum, 2012: 2). Indeed, we will be moving towards a short-sighted culture of 'fast tracking' accomplishment, measurable by profit margins and little else. How does this prepare young people for life? How does this prepare them for social and political interaction; interfaith and intercultural dialogue within pluralistic societies; local, national and international collaboration; accountability and responsibility within an interdependent global community? Although a "strong economy is a means to human ends, [it is not] an end in itself" (Nussbaum, 2012: 10). Further, progression and achievement in education, health or indeed political liberty do not correlate with economic wealth or true democratic societies (ibid).

As I have stated, 'botched jobs' have far reaching consequences and we are only glimpsing the first wave of repercussions. Undergraduates, to some extent, have swallowed the propaganda leveled at them by the government and act more frequently as consumers than students. Academic judgements are often questioned in relation to studies, assessments, exams and grades. Seemingly, honours degrees are now purchased, not read for (Churchwell, 2013). McGuigan (2013) believes the diminution of education to marketization reduces the status of any university to that of a supermarket. He further argues that "enshrining Philistinism in the British university system [allows] the government to open up new and lucrative business opportunities for 'cowboy' providers" (ibid: 83). The question must be posed; what kind of education, levels of academic study, knowledge base, standards and quality does the future hold for new generations of undergraduates? Nussbaum (2012) warns that the introduction of consumerism to education moves sound pedagogy to the realms of a spoon-fed market driven narrowness in vision, poor articulation and argument and lack of independent thinking. It is highly likely that academic standards will fall, not raise. Indeed, Churchwell (2013; i) argues

that "universities driven by market logics produce more consumers who only see the world in the instrumentalist terms that government ministers seem to think should be driving education". Moreover, undergraduates "distracted by the pursuit of wealth [are] increasingly [prone to becoming] useful profit-makers rather than thoughtful citizens" pressurized to cut costs and pursue financial reward rather than fulfilling educational aspirations crucial to "preserving a healthy society" (Nussbaum, 2012: 142).

The 'nip & tuck' of the humanities and social sciences under Brown's knife is not only radical it is extremely dangerous. As with any cosmetic 'quick-fix' the consequences are often dire and long-term damage can never be fully realized until it is too late. It is true that the UK face a national deficit – almost all countries do – but the drastic measures of cutting public funding from education is not the solution. Indeed, if anything the economy will suffer short-term as well as long-term. The current debt amassed by students is only payable once they graduate, are securely employed and earning above the trigger re-payment target. Therefore, the government has to credit the re-payment in advance and will undoubtable lose up to 30 per cent of the total student debt because a significant proportion of students may never earn more than the re-payment capped salary. This has to be the worst 'botched up' operation a government has made with public funding; it simply makes "complete nonsense of the … claim that the national deficient must be paid off urgently" (McGuigan, 2013: 87). Further, and perhaps even more incredulous, is the attempted cover-up of the actual goal – a structural change; eradicate the public sector and "privatize where possible" (ibid). Frighteningly, this is a real possibility and public education may slowly and systematically be maneuvered into the private sphere - as consecutive conservative governments have attempted since Thatcher began the hatchet job in the 1980s. Thatcher said "economics is the method but the object is to change the soul" (Thatcher cited in Harvey, 2005: 23), and Brown is certainly attempting to do just that! Indeed, he is completing the "steady marketization of UK higher education begun under Thatcher … transforming a publically funded higher-education system into one driven by consumer demand" (Loosely, 2013: 91). Collini's (2012: 188) accusation pointed towards the coalition is, in my opinion, absolutely true; he convincingly proposes that "the coalition is at this moment using the whipped-up frenzy about the deficit in the public finances as a cover for a recognizably ideological assault on all forms of public provision". He further adds that Brown has "wielded the axe in advance, not trimming public expenditure on teaching in universities but more or less completely abolishing it" (ibid). Certainly, "the whole system of higher education teeters on the brink of full-scale privatisation" (McGuigan, 2013: 86).

Universities have a serious role to play in preparing students for life and work within a democratic society. The humanities and social sciences especially equip students with essential skills "necessary to negotiate a world of constantly changing demands, requiring the ability to adapt and reflect, not just to make and produce, [they] learn to resist received wisdom, to challenge, argue, interpret and persuade, to think about their own relation to society and to

others. They learn how to change their minds: innovation applies to thought as well as to technology" (Churchwell, 2013: i); these skills and abilities cannot be measured in monetary terms.

The fact that universities incur costs in order to educate future generations should not be a factor held against them, it should be a factor that is supported! Considering the majority of political leaders that have benefited from the humanities and social sciences, I find it hard to believe the lack of support and understanding regarding the significant roles these disciplines have in shaping any community, society or country – specifically in regard to local, national and international relations, quality of life and culture and least of all – economic impact. Although universities have a relationship with national economy, this does not mean that they should become part of that economy in a business sense – education is 'not for profit' for a reason; education, knowledge, the freedom to think and debate are crucial to democratic societies – the moment education becomes a commodity for sale and profit is the moment we lose democracy. Life is more than wealth!

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