We need to abolish the antiquated honours degree

David Colquhoun

The traditional honours degree has had its day. It is a relic from an age when only a few students could afford to go to university. The current system tries to take schoolchildren and over three years prepare them for a life of academic research. Even in its heyday it often failed to do that. Now, in vastly bigger third-year classes attempt to teach advanced stuff to students who do not want to go into research. But funding and promotion in universities are dependent largely on research. So there is enormous pressure for academics to publish vast amounts in order to chase the funds.

The Research Assessment Exercise has done untold damage to the quality of UK research, as well as distracting academics from teaching. The idea that only students should be taught by people who are doing research, but there are just not enough good researchers.

So we need a better way to organise higher education. The first essential is to abolish the honours degree. It is simply too specialist for an age of mass education. Rather, there should be more general first degrees that aim to produce critical thinking but cover a wider range of subjects at a lower level. This would decrease the need for first degrees taught by active researchers. Students could be taught more cheaply in "teaching only" institutions whose staff were not under pressure to publish papers. After the first degree, that modest fraction of students who have the ability and desire to acquire specialist knowledge would go to graduate school. There they could be taught by specialists.

This would allow the UK universities already have graduate schools? Yes, but they are largely offshoots of graduate schools now largely provide courses in advanced PowerPoint.

Human Resources that provide courses in advanced PowerPoint and lifestyle psychobabble. What we need is real graduate schools that teach advanced stuff, education, not training. The faculty at research-intensive universities—or institutions of academic—spend their time writing grants applications, churning out trivial papers and undergrad teaching would have time to do research and teach the students at grad school.

This scheme is not ideal, but with a funding crisis looming, it is the least bad it would be. It would stop the vast numbers of student to get a degree, while improving advanced teaching and research without needing more money. Education and research are both public goods, so we must do everything possible to avoid charging students for notes and fees.

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