



We need to abolish the antiquated honours degree

Graduate schools now largely provide courses in advanced PowerPoint

David Colquhoun

Last updated October 11 2010 8:22PM

The traditional honours degree has had its day. It's a relic from an age when only a few went 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, teachers 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: quantity matters more than quality. The Research Assessment Exercise has done untold damage to the quality of UK research, as well as distracting attention from teaching. Ideally students should to 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 to a lower level. This would decrease the need to have 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 at a higher level than the present third year of an honours degree and be prepared for 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: quantity matters more than quality. The Research Assessment Exercise has done untold damage to the quality of UK research, as well as distracting attention from teaching. Ideally students should to 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 to a lower level. This would decrease the need to have 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 at a higher level than the present third year of an honours degree and be prepared for research.

Hang on, don't UK universities already have graduate schools? Yes, but they are largely offshoots of 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 institutes of advanced studies — instead of spending their time writing grant 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 solution. It would allow large numbers of students to get a degree, while improving advanced teaching and so the quality of research, without needing more money. Education and research are both public goods, so we must do everything possible to avoid charging students crippling fees.

David Colquhoun is Research Professor of Pharmacology at University College London

[Post a comment](#)

[Follow Columnists](#)

[★ Recommend \(2\)](#)

[Print](#)

[Email](#)

[Share](#)

[Like](#)