

“Minimum expectations” are no way to value the arts, humanities, and social sciences

The UK government recently announced its intention to reduce funding for ‘low value’ degrees in the arts, humanities and social sciences. Drawing on her research into the history of higher education policy, **Zoe Hope Bulaitis** argues that current government demands for courses to demonstrate value fail on their own limited terms and that like previous debates around minimum expectations reflect questions of resource allocation, rather than value.

Recent weeks have seen a predictable turn in the ongoing debate about the value of higher education in the UK (see [here](#) and [here](#)). Creative and humanities subjects are once more in the crosshairs of government subsidy cuts for teaching grants, with some facing a proposed reduction of up to 50% in 2021/22. These subjects are those that have been categorised into “C.1.2” and include performing and creative arts, media studies and archaeology. The following table, from the Office for Students consultation document, outlines how only these subjects will be negatively affected in terms of funding:

Price group	Funding rate per FTE for 2020-21	Funding rate per FTE for 2021-22	Percent change
A	£9,720	£10,110	+
B	£1,458	£1,516.5	+
C1.1	£243	£252.75	+
C1.2	£243	£121.50	-50
C2	£0	£0	
D	£0	£0	

Estimated changes to high-cost subject rates of funding for 2021-22. Source: [Office for Students \(2021\)](#) “[Consultation on recurrent funding for 2021-22](#)”

In real spending, these proposed cuts mean that funding support for arts courses in the academic year 2021-22 would be reduced from [£36 million to £19 million](#). This decision is the result of Gavin Williamson, as education secretary, sending a [statutory guidance letter](#) to the Office for Students (OfS) in January 2021, stating that “OfS should reprioritise funding towards the provision of high-cost, high-value subjects that support the NHS and wider healthcare policy, high-cost STEM subjects and/or specific labour market needs”.

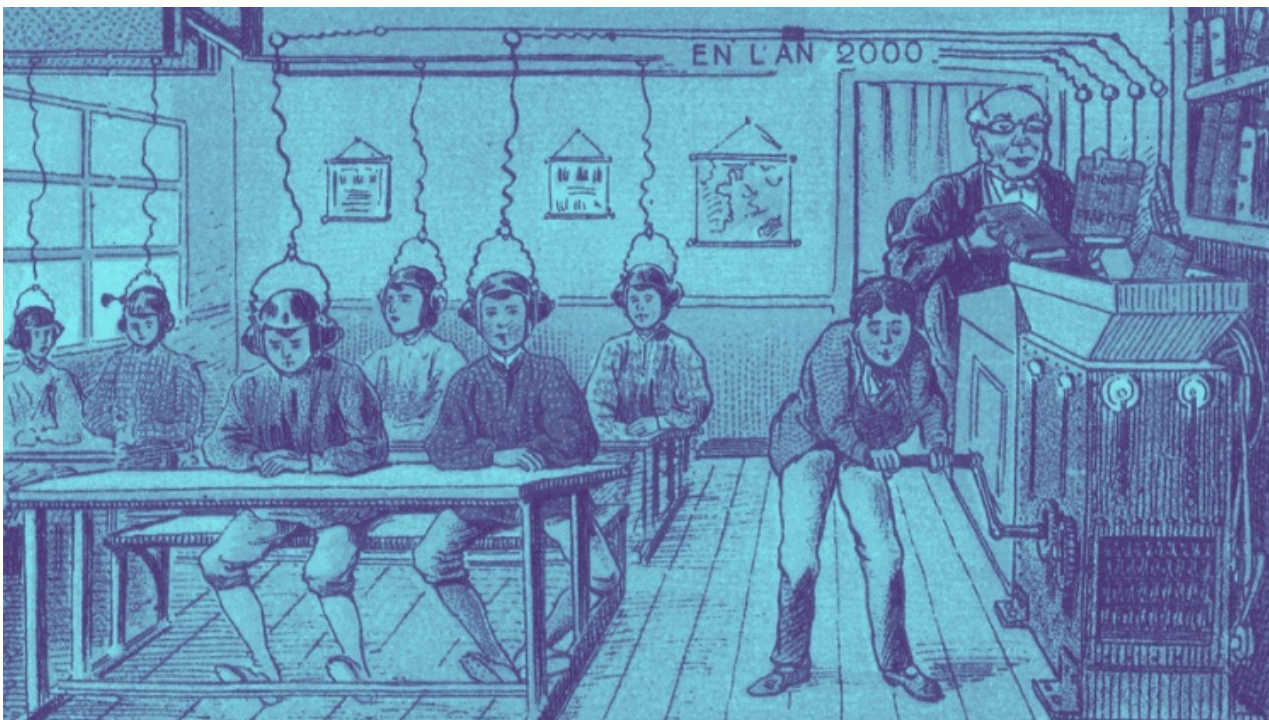
Therefore, these “C1.2” subjects are defined by the government as being only “high-cost courses”, where there is no recognised value return or “labour market” need. Media [coverage](#) has [identified](#) how this policy action aligns with longer term and ongoing de-prioritisation of humanities, arts, and social sciences subjects in the UK. The challenges of the pandemic have postponed more substantial and long-term responses to the [Augar Review](#). However, the nuanced definition of “value to society” contained within Augar, which recognised “that successful outcomes for both students and society are about more than pay” and it is important to “[understand the social value of some lower-earning professions such as nursing and social care, and the cultural value of studying the Arts and Humanities](#)” is overlooked in the proposed cuts to teaching grants. In its place, is the language of “minimum expectations”, which does a disservice to the diversity and depth of benefits of creative education at both individual and societal levels.

What is missing is a means to better understand what graduate “success” looks like in the creative arts.

Richard Adams, [accurately observes](#) how these measures are a punishment for “universities and courses that fall below “minimum expectations”, without taking into account any differences that might affect those outcomes, such as the background of the students involved”. What is missing is a means to better understand what graduate “[success](#)” looks like in the creative arts. Lauren England observes how in the case of craft careers, this success requires consideration of

“the incubation period for creative practice and creative graduates’ careers [...] graduate surveys such as the Destination of Leavers of Higher Education (DLHE) survey and the use of Longitudinal Employment Outcomes (LEO), graduate salary and tax data to determine ‘value for money’ from a degree. [...] the structure of the creative industries and employment [...] include[ing] unpaid or low-paid internships and portfolio working where work supplementing creative practice is not at ‘graduate level’” ([England, 2020](#))

This model for value would take into account the kinds of social and lived experiences of creative careers. However, the policy debate over minimum expectations and ‘minimal value’, as I have explored in my recent open access book [Value of the Humanities: The Neoliberal University and Our Victorian Inheritance](#), dates back to at least the foundation of [compulsory systems of education in the nineteenth century](#). What we can learn from this longer policy history is that an interest educational value is rarely, if ever, the motivation for this style of reform. Instead, national budgetary cost-cutting is the demand and “minimum expectations” is the model for justifying and rendering it possible.



Adapted from At School, from the series France en l’an 2000, Jean Marc Cote (if 1901) or Villemard (if 1910) via [Wikimedia Commons](#) (Public Domain)

I want to highlight here that even on their own terms, the C.2.1 subject cuts are a specific example of the short-sighted economism of “minimum expectation” policy culture. First, this funding cut is at odds with the continued expansion of the creative sector in economic terms, which contributes [£115.9bn a year](#) to the UK GVA, accounting for 5.9% of UK GVA and is growing at four times the rate of the UK economy as a whole. This represents [43.6% growth between 2010 and 2019](#) in real terms. The pipeline of students in creative subjects is necessary to support this success.

Second, in terms of Williamson’s stated interest in “specific labour market needs”, there are national skills shortages in many jobs associated with C.1.2 subjects in the UK. By cross-referencing the proposed C1.2 subject funding-cut list with the current ‘[Job types included on the shortage occupations list](#)’ for Skilled Worker visas (where a ‘shortage occupation’ is a skilled job where there is a shortage of workers in the UK) we find that 12 out of the 45 jobs on the current shortage occupations list can be fulfilled by creative and humanities graduates, with 7 of these being exclusive to those with expert training in the creative arts (see artists, dancers and choreographers, musicians, arts officers, producers and directors, graphic designers, social and humanities scientists, specifically only archaeologists). We meet this national need by funding creative education. As with the growth of the creative industries, the shortage of occupations shows significant incongruity in terms of educational funding and the needs of the nation.

The proposed funding cuts show a disconnect between the changing nature of work and how creative subjects are essential to meeting those demands. Clearly, the pressures of the global pandemic have kept the economic argument at the forefront of higher education debate. From the transformation of teaching from physical to online spaces, to the rebate debate around student halls and accommodations, to the sudden removal of public access to libraries and the individual need to purchase online copies and arrange institutional digital licenses, the economies of higher education have been in the spotlight this year.

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These matters are, however, also social questions. What is the value of a university education? What matters in terms of teaching provision? How does the lived experience of university play into its transformational effects? What duties of care does an institution have for the health and securing of its’ student body? What previously near-invisible barriers of inclusivity and exclusivity have become impossible to ignore? These are the kinds of questions that those working in the arts, humanities, and social sciences might ask back to the Office for Students, when talking about “minimum expectations” for our university system. What we might expect in return, is policy recognition that value for money is not a singular calculation of course costs, nor is an economic model of valuation the only metric which is valued in meeting basic social need.

Readers can explore the issues raised in this post in greater depth in Dr Bulaitis open access book, [Value of the Humanities: The Neoliberal University and Our Victorian Inheritance](#) (2020).

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