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'Low Value Courses': Understanding How Arts and Humanities Students Perceive Their Choice of Degree Subject

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## **Abstract**

In the wake of recent policy decisions and governmental rhetoric that directly targets Arts and Humanities degrees in the UK, this thesis investigates how Arts and Humanities students perceive their choice of degree subject. Using a conceptual framework that combines the Foucauldian concept of discourse, and the work of Foucault, Bernstein and other authors who explore how power is structured in society, a thematic and critical discourse analysis of the data reveals to what extent certain discourses were present in student's perceptions. The effect of neoliberalism in Higher Education constructs students as consumers and Arts and Humanities degrees as 'low value', intrinsic value directly related to monetary worth. These form the neoliberal discourses addressed in the study. Reflecting upon the marketisation of Higher Education, the study argues that students are unwilling participants in neoliberal imaginings, their perceptions a site of resistance and struggle between interpretations inside and outside the dominant discourse. Overall, the 'student as consumer' and 'low value' discourses had not, by any means fully embedded themselves within student perceptions. Rather, corresponding with an important and raging academic debate surrounding the purpose of university and the value of degrees, given the realms of their reality, students were able to confidently and imaginatively envision alternative discourses that challenged neoliberal ideals. Such a challenge poses significant questions around how universities are conceptualised and managed going forward, and to what organising principles governments should prioritise for a healthy and happy society.

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List of abbreviations:

HE – Higher Education

A&H – Arts and Humanities

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## Introduction

In the wake of significant media attention, in May 2021 the Office for Students, the UK government's Higher Education (HE) regulatory body, were forced to release a statement regarding their headline-making proposals to cut funding in Arts and Humanities (A&H) by 50%. Within the report they clarified that universities would still receive the current full tuition fee loan of up to £9250, and that it would be the subsidy provided to help deliver subjects that are expensive to teach that would see the reduction. Despite this, several news reporters published articles covering the 'fierce backlash' the policy news received, and the language and rhetoric used by government ministers in describing A&H courses, namely that they have become 'dead-end', 'low-value' and 'mickey-mouse degrees'.

Will Hazell (2021a, 2021b, & 2022) for *i News* stated the policy was part of a 'wider move' to cease financial support for courses that delivered 'poorer job outcomes' and instead funnel funding towards courses in Science, Technology, Engineering and Maths (STEM), or those, as reported by Sally Weale (2021) for *The Guardian*, more 'in line with the government's priorities' for economic growth and 'key industry' support. The student newspaper, *The Tab* reported that many Creative Arts degrees could be targeted such as Music and Drama, as they produce the least high-wage graduate employment opportunities and, indeed, in the months since the announcement (Goodkind, 2022), Sheffield Hallam University have dropped English Literature as an offered course in line with the 'low value' mandates (Rowan, 2022). Michelle Donelan (2020), the then Universities Minister, has stated that due to the 'major investment' students and taxpayers make in HE, 'establishing value for money' in ensuring graduate careers has to be a priority, likening the measures to ones that protect consumers from purchasing a product that does not satisfy 'minimum acceptable standard for quality and outcome'. Protecting students from being 'ripped off', Donelan (2020) stated that not providing the 'skills employers value' is setting them up 'to fail', preventable through a policy direction that will 'revolutionise' HE and encourage 'a culture change towards lifelong learning, upskilling and reskilling'. Underneath this lies the concern of an increasing national deficit due to unpaid-back student loans, a figure rising in number due to low graduate earnings (see Department for Education, 2019).

A direct academic response to the policy has been limited thus far, but many have joined the outcry against the changes, Dr Jo Grady from the University and College Union, for example,



calling it an ‘act of vandalism’ against arts and entertainment (Weale, 2021). Graduates from Sheffield Hallam’s BA English Literature course have spoken out against the lack of acknowledgement of the skills the degree can provide and its worthwhile nature, one stating the government’s assessment of what counts as a useful outcome is ‘crude’, forgets the broader benefits beyond direct employment statistics, and ‘smacks of us-and-them politics’ (Otte, 2022). Bashir Makhoul (2022) for *Times Higher Education* writes that such policies are ‘short-sighted’, ‘misguided’ and ‘destructive’, only serving to stifle creativity and innovation in the long term with their ‘narrow’ approach to metrics and definition of ‘low value’. Such critiques, in conjunction with the language of skills used by Donelan, corresponds with several wider debates surrounding the marketisation of HE and the impact of the influx of neoliberal ideals, which reduce HE to simply a training ground for young people entering the labour market. This trend has provoked a proliferating area of scholarly research, of which this thesis will add to. Using such a policy as a focal point to explore the ‘low value’ rhetoric chosen to target certain A&H courses, I will be conducting an exploration into the core debates and issues surrounding broader policy trends currently shaping HE, and how the purpose of HE is being rebranded to satisfy a neoliberal imagining of the world. By asking A&H students for their direct response to such policies and governmental attitudes, alternative interpretations can be presented, for some of their responses resist the ‘low value’ label by citing the experiences and learning that have shaped them to become better people with visions for a better society. In exploring how they perceive their choice of degree subject, with many resenting the denigration of the A&H, whilst some admitted to the limited usefulness of their degrees, especially in regards to employment opportunities, the complexity of such an issue is revealed. Perceptive and aware, students were not blind to the influence of the current political climate on HE, the job market, and their positions as members of society. Therefore, if governments are to propound that they are looking out for student’s best interests in cutting funding to “low value” courses, then it is necessary to understand whether the students themselves believe this to be an accurate depiction of their subjects, and indeed whether this is the lens universities should be judged through more broadly. Although not directly spoken about, student’s responses pertained to how they perceived the purpose of HE and their place within it, which often lay slightly beyond the restrictive skill-based consumerist interpretation advocated by government, but also showed signs that this interpretation had an influence over their mindsets. In order to comprehend and effectively analyse such ideas, it is fruitful to first understand where such policy logic comes from and to explore how neoliberal ideology, governmentality, and

economics has influenced governmental approaches to HE. Therefore, I will begin this thesis with a thorough exploration of the literature relevant to my question.

Beginning with the marketisation of HE, in recent decades, neoliberal ideals have begun moulding HE to operate as a firm in a competitive global marketplace, with many researchers commenting on the intricate technologies of such an approach and the wide-ranging effects they have generated, forming the first part of the literature review. Such effects include the commodification of research, the influential strength of industry and the economy in guiding university activity, and the placement of HE as central to economic growth, providing the high skill employees and technological innovation needed in a burgeoning knowledge economy. As a result of these ideas and the consequential rise in tuition fees, the conception of the student has been reshaped to become that of a consumer. The reformation of the university into a business which serves the customer of the student has generated much academic engagement, with several interpretations and comments, which will be covered in the second section of the literature review. This section highlights the dominance of the portrayal of students as homo economicus, a neoliberal idea that positions individuals as rational investors in their futures, and the varying ways this is embodied by students themselves.

Having given a foundation of the contemporary vision of the university and student's places within it, the literature review then turns to how this has affected perceptions of A&H degrees, demonstrating how a heavily skills-based, technological approach that seems to position STEM as more directly useful to economic growth has pervaded HE. Although A&H has received widespread defence, much of it is expressed within the logic of economic utility, which can be used to understand how students may also defend their subjects. There are some authors who take a different approach, whose ideas will then be used to introduce the next section of the literature review, which questions the neoliberal construction of HE and explains how academics have thought outside of this vision. Referencing alternate conceptions such as educating to stimulate human growth, citizen development, and social and emotional intelligence, allows for a clear comparison to be drawn with current ideals, the logic of which one could become trapped within. Such a comparison can then be applied to the responses of students, grounding their different ideas within a broad literature base. In further support of my approach, I will be citing the work of authors who have attempted similar projects by interviewing A&H students in order to understand their experience of university, whose research presents competing hypotheses of how students approach HE. Finally, I will introduce

the conceptual framework for my research, which combines the Foucauldian concept of discourse, and the work of Foucault, Bernstein, Bourdieu and others who investigate the workings and structures of power within society. Therefore, my analysis can thread together the topics discussed in the literature and present them through a unique theoretical lens. In this way, I link together the reciprocity of how neoliberal ethics are expressed in policy and are then disseminated to individuals, influencing their perceptions, mindsets, and actions. My use of critical discourse analysis to detect such a dissemination is explained in my methodology.

My data is presented thematically, under 4 broad themes, to construct a cogent narrative of student perspectives. These themes are: the environment of negativity; resisting the governmental perspective; rationalising why A&H could be ‘low value’; and defending A&H. From these, it becomes obvious that, in trying to comprehend and perceive their own choice to study an A&H degree, students are in a state of conflict, torn between ideological forces that suggest they construct their university experience and the value of their subject through neoliberal, ‘student as consumer’ and ‘low value’ discourses, and their own strong desire to resist them. My discussion will explore further the level of influence these discourses have over the students’ perceptions. In concluding analysis of the final theme, the passion with which students expressed alternative visions for A&H and HE strongly suggests that the neoliberal framework has not entirely embedded itself within the way individuals view the world, and that there is indeed space for competing discourses to have an effect.

Under increasing governmental pressure to provide ‘value for money’, the resistance universities have demonstrated thus far to the denigration of the A&H that has been growing for decades, is now becoming untenable. This makes understanding and exposing the workings of neoliberal discourse in HE, and the potential alternatives, all the more pertinent.

## Literature Review

### The Marketisation of HE and the Influx of Neoliberal Ideals

As the dominant regulative ideology of recent decades, it is important to define neoliberalism, although definitions are varied. In her exploration of the rise of far-right antidemocratic politics in the West after decades of neoliberal policy-making, Brown (2019) describes how governance has been redefined as ‘*for* markets and oriented by market... [and] business principles’ (original emphasis) (pp. 20, 57). This dramatically effects social welfare, which has been largely dismantled or privatised, the responsibility for areas such as education and health being given over to individuals who must operate within a marketed domain (Brown, 2019, pp. 83, 19, 37 and 39). Rhodes & Marsh (1992) and Jackson (1992) cover how Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher implemented neoliberal reform in the UK in conjunction with President Ronald Reagan in the United States during the latter part of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. Thatcher’s policies undid the ‘post-war Keynesian democratic consensus’ and its focus on demand management, which guaranteed high employment, and instead promoted economic growth using supply-side policies and cuts to public expenditure (Rhodes & Marsh, 1992, p. 2; Jackson, 1992, pp. 12-3). Bradshaw (1992) essentialises Thatcher’s doctrine as allowing private consumption and market principles to enhance choice, freedom and enterprise, going against the increased dependency and thus slow economic growth she believed the welfare state fostered (pp. 81-2).

For universities, the effects of neoliberal policy have been wide-ranging and profound, leading to what is referred to as the marketisation of HE. Brown & Lauder (1996) provide a broad and elucidating look into neoliberalism and education at large by exploring the trends of and links between education, globalisation and economic development. Alongside a critique of the direction and problems they observed in the late 20<sup>th</sup> Century, they present the historical growth in enthusiasm for market competition, privatisation and competitive individualism’ (Brown & Lauder, 1996, p. 1). They recognise that under such market rules, workers are expected to succeed by trading ‘skills, knowledge and entrepreneurial acumen in an unfettered global marketplace’ (Brown & Lauder, 1996, p. 3). For nation states, the necessity of ‘high value customised production and services using multi-skilled workers’ under post-Fordism is related to the necessity to compete in ‘global *knowledge wars*’ (original emphasis) (Brown & Lauder,

1996, pp. 4-5), where wealth depends upon ‘the exploitation of leading-edge technologies, corporate innovation and the upgrading of the quality of human resources’ (Brown & Lauder, 1996, p. 11). In education this leads to a dynamic of ‘survival of the fittest’ and a ‘quasi-market within which schools will compete’ (Brown & Lauder, 1996, pp. 6-7), as corroborated by Marginson (2018) in his analysis of public/private distinctions in HE, where he states universities have become ‘politically public’ but ‘economically private’ (p. 333). Such a dynamic of a quasi-market leaves HEIs in a double-bind. This means, as they are not in a position where failure is an option (as full market logic would suggest), universities have far less autonomy than a fully marketized institution would have. This leaves them exposed to greater centralised control from the state, which can manipulate activity to suit government aims. In other words, rather than just reacting to the demands of the market, shaped by the consumers i.e. the students, university activity is increasingly shaped by policy-interventions, as demonstrated within the recent policy decisions this thesis explores.

In an extensive investigation into the challenges and drawbacks of marketisation in HE specifically, Santamaría (2020) states that, under the pressures of commercialisation, privatisation, and corporate and capitalist influence, HE’s very meaning has been redefined, neoliberal ideology ‘commodifying its intrinsic value and emphasising... transferable skills and competencies’ (pp. 22-3). Santamaría (2020) breaks down critique into three main areas, the first being the shortcomings of the relationship between university, industry and government whereby pressure is put upon universities and their staff to incite an entrepreneurial culture and boost technological innovation and output (pp. 23-4). This causes inherent tensions and contradictions in mission and purpose and commodifies any Third Mission activities universities may undertake in the so-called knowledge economy (p. 24).

Another is the emphasis on competition. Scott (2014) contends that the market model and the competitive rather than coordinated ideals of neoliberalism stand in opposition the original ethos of HE being a public system geared towards continued expansion for equality of access, (p. 162). The effect of competition is perhaps most marked in the University Rankings System constructed to measure performance in a variety of indicators and hence advertise to students the “value” of attending an institution (Santamaría, 2020, p. 29). Santamaría (2020) posits that rankings cause an ‘unwarranted homogenisation of the field of HE’, manipulating universities into aligning performance with a particular political agenda that ‘value[s] excellence over equity’ (p. 30). Expanding on this, Cantwell & Marginson (2018) describe how HE, in

becoming a high-participation system under the quasi-market model, exacerbates unequal resource allocation and distribution and thus a vertical stratification or hierarchy. Trapped in the pursuit of prestige and elite status within the ranking system, institutions operate and embody competitive ideals that stipulate differential value from participation, segmentation of the student body on a hierarchical basis, and institutional hierarchy (p. 126). In this way Cantwell & Marginson (2018) state that ‘the imagined link between economic prosperity, globalization, and competition’ has become so widely accepted ‘as to operate as a policy instinct, a managerial instinct, and a universal mantra for more or less every new situation’ (p. 144). Similarly, Meek (2000) concludes that market competition reduces diversity of goals and practices and instead results in the ‘emulation and... convergence of academic norms and values’ (p. 37), meaning the accountability measures put in place are moulding the majority of HE institutions into serving neoliberal objectives (p. 25). These neoliberal objectives centre around the economy and the labour market (Meek, 2000, p. 25), the HE sector expected, as stated by Gidley et al. (2010) to provide the human capital and skills needed for national economic growth in the competitive global market (p. 132). In this way, the wider goals of social justice and achieving human potential are ignored and side-lined (Gidley et al., 2010, p. 142), or, as stated by Marginson (2016), the increasing stratification and embedded competition diminishing the ‘common public good’ that HE can provide (p. 431).

### Student As Consumer

Coupled with the process of defining HE as the provider of skilled employees in the labour market is the construction of the student as a consumer and customer, the third of Santamaría’s (2020) critiques of neoliberalism within HE. Given the central tenet of neoliberalism being that ‘the individual is a rational optimiser’ (Santamaría, 2020, p. 25), systems within HE have been geared to treating students as if they are paying for a service, that service being to achieve a worthwhile degree that will guarantee them a well-paid job, and this is heavily considered within the quality measures discussed above. As such, education has become a ‘private good’ (Meek, 2000, p. 24; Wilkins & Burke, 2015, p. 440), to be traded in a society ‘reimagined as the labour market’ where creating a ‘deliberative, just, and equitable community is lost’ to the quest of ‘competitive advantage’ (Santamaría, 2020, p. 30). As a consequence of this ethos, the escalation of student fees, particularly in the UK and the US, has been justified under the rationale of the ‘buyer-supplier’ relationship (Huybers et al., 2015, p. 53). This is a rationale that Velayutham (2021) postulates has led to high debt and inequality in outcome, the

guarantee of financial compensation in career heavily skewed towards wealthier students. Despite this, the meritocratic rhetoric of ‘equality of opportunity’ persists (Velayutham, 2021, p. 377), especially within widening participation policy (see Evans et al., 2019), and increasing numbers of students are encouraged to invest in their futures with a university degree. Esson & Ertl’s (2016) research into student perceptions of study-related debt is one example of the numerous studies into the effect of HE becoming a private good, paid for by the individual rather than the public purse (Esson & Ertl, 2016, p. 1266). Considering the rise in UK tuition fees of 2012, they discuss how the burden of payment has placed ‘greater responsibility on young people to make life-changing financial decisions’, positioning HE as a purely financial investment (Esson & Ertl, 2016, p. 1268). They conclude that a ‘bleak economic backdrop and highly competitive labour market’ meant their participants viewed HE as a ‘sound long-term investment’, showing that students buy into the idea of the graduate premium and believe that a key route to success is through investing in HE with few alternatives (Esson & Ertl, 2016, p. 1277).

Indeed, several other studies support the argument that students have to some degree embodied their constructed role as consumers and rational agents. Buckner & Stawser (2016), for example, argue that current students view HE as a ‘financial rather than a philosophical training ground’ (p. 361), with an obsession with their grades and belief that instructors need to meet student desires in a transactional process. Delving further into student perceptions, in a study regarding student’s experiences of employability and competition for jobs, Tholen (2013) concludes that British students were very responsive to the demands of the neoliberal labour market in which human capital, (i.e. skills) is an important tradeable asset in a competition or ‘rat race’ designed to drive worker and economic productivity. Students interpreted competing for jobs as about relative performance, ranking of candidates and, the importance of signals to demonstrate one’s worth (for research on signalling see Spence (1973) and Weiss, 1995), exemplifying how their logic and thought process is dominated by the ‘rules of competition’ the current climate engenders (Tholen, 2013, pp. 276-9).

Similarly, Tomlinson (2008) examines how students view the utility of their degrees in ‘opening up opportunities in the labour market’ through the lens of two competing models: human capital theory and rational choice; and positional conflict and credentialism (p. 51). Human capital theory (HCT), as already referred to by Tholen (2013), stipulates that expansive education and training can yield social benefits in the form of a ‘highly skilled, flexible

workforce' (Tomlinson, 2008, p. 50). This both increases economic output, and allows for private returns in 'higher individual earnings over time', 'better career progression' and 'wider labour market scope' (Tomlinson, 2008, p. 50). Brown et al. (2020) cover extensively the growth of HCT in the West as a compelling social organiser. They discuss its intellectual development from Adam Smith and his conception of *Homo economicus*, a person who acts for self-interest over benevolence, and the expensive machine, that a person's labour and value can be qualified and delineated based on the level of skill required (pp. 12-3). Other key figures are Theodore Schultz and Gary Becker, who began treating education as a pivotal part of investing in one's human capital, Becker credited with the education-centred model of HCT and conception of the neoliberal functionings of the knowledge economy used today (Brown et al., 2020, pp. 16-23). In his own paper, Becker (1962) states HCT positions schools as a 'special kind of firm and students as a special kind of trainee' (p. 26), and the earnings in the labour market as 'gross of the return on human capital' where 'some persons may earn more than others simply because they invest more in themselves' (p. 48).

Alternatively, Tomlinson's (2008) other lens of credentialism views the growth in education credentials as not being reflective of a true skills demand from the labour market or as adding much value to an individual's human capital (p. 50). Rather, expansion has resulted in an inflation of HE credentials that mean the 'stakes have been raised for what is needed to *get jobs*' (original emphasis) (Tomlinson, 2008, p. 50). Tomlinson's (2008) results showed that neither lens, that is HCT or credentialism, was entirely adequate. Aspects of the HCT discourse had been internalised, degrees seen to boost skills and give advantages in the labour market (Tomlinson, 2008, pp. 52-4), and signalling concerns taking 'primacy over more intrinsic values around self-development' (Tomlinson, 2008, p. 56). However, HCT was inadequate to entirely explain their approach because many doubted the demand for such skills, mentioning fears of a congested labour market, some suggesting that their disciplinary knowledge would have little direct transferability to the labour market (Tomlinson, 2008, p. 56; p. 59). Indeed, in the wake of concerns about an overly saturated graduate labour market and 'economic turbulence', Harrison (2019) posits that, rather than investors, students should now be viewed as insurers where attending university is considered as the least risky option for young people, acting as insurance against downward mobility. Even in this model, however, student's entrance into HE is still viewed through the lens of their relationship with the labour market and future opportunities, highlighting the dominance and stickiness of this narrative.



In the academic community, the pull of this model of HE is perhaps best demonstrated in the proliferation of studies related to employability and understanding and improving student's employability skills. Wilton's (2011) paper, for example, covers how employability is a principal mechanism in policy formation around HE, and states how students viewed employability as a large part of their degrees, with varying results in the job market. Concurrently, O'Leary (2017) states that employability is both 'high on the agenda' for policy-makers and industry, but also for students themselves across multiple generations. In a study based in Portugal, a country effected by similar processes to the UK, Sin et al., (2019) explored the views of academics of employability, where views varied, some rejecting employability as a purpose of HE and others in support, but all aware of its dominance in target setting and performance measurement.

In such a way, neoliberal views and discourses have embedded themselves within Higher Education with varying effects. It is within this climate that A&H degrees have come under fire for their supposed lack of transferable skills in the labour market, and therefore usefulness overall. Increasing scholarly attention has been directed at this topic, discussing how A&H has been presented as inferior to other courses in purpose, and therefore examining potential alternative ways of viewing the purpose and benefits of an A&H degree. This body of work will formulate the next section of this literature review.

### A&H Under Attack? The Economisation of the A&H

In research occurring as early as 1968, what Snow & Cohen (1968) label as the Physical and Life Sciences have been at 'the apex of the [discipline] hierarchy' in the eyes of students. Their investigation into the differential attitudes towards subject areas from students in a variety of disciplines revealed how the preference for 'the technological and scientific' above A&H has been mounting for decades (Snow & Cohen, 1968). In a piece defending A&H, Hamman (2013) states that under the guise of 'economic pragmatism', the value of A&H education has been particularly questioned, viewed as 'outdated and elitist', and as useless for providing skills needed in the workplace, not 'worth doing' because it does not lead to 'economic gain' (pp. 1-2). Indeed, recognising this trend in the US, Taylor et al. (2013) argue that the quasi-market nature of HE 'prompt[s] colleges and universities to de-emphasise the humanities' (p. 698), because 'students [are encouraged] to enrol in programs that provide credentials to enter particular occupations and valorise science and engineering research' (p. 681).

Defence of A&H in academia comes in two broad categories, those that work within the paradigm of the skills and knowledge economy and those that resist it, a significant majority belonging to the former. Hemmy & Mehta (2021) posit that A&H programs, in particular Liberal Arts, can be ‘re-brand[ed]’ to allow... transferable affective skills’ to be aligned with ‘the breadth of [academic] knowledge traditionally intrinsic’ to such a degree (p. 275). They state such a task is ‘challenging’ but necessary due to the fact that the ‘business model of education has become the global norm’, and the misguided perception that the ‘demands of the market and that of a liberal program are seemingly in conflict’ (p. 275), choosing to study such a degree seen as impractical and a ‘flight of fancy’ (p. 277).

Similarly, Gleason (2020) explores different ways A&H can respond to the domination of STEM on the political agenda in the US. Gleason (2020) covers how the current political and financial landscape views STEM as the ‘best vehicle for economic viability’, and therefore channels the majority of funding towards it (pp. 187-9). One of the proposed responses is to adjust the humanities towards ‘STEM’s ends’, that is, ‘tap[ping] into STEM’s economic power’, and focusing on how A&H can be approached with instrumentality, finding ways it can ‘help students move into jobs and even innovate new ones’ (Gleason, 2020, p. 189). Another is that A&H can add alternate dimensions to STEM disciplines such as creativity, empathy, context, and narrative, to existing jobs (Gleason, 2020, pp. 191-3). Furthermore, A&H can ‘bring innovative spirit and open-minded thinking’ alongside the ‘logic’ of science (Gleason, 2020, pp. 194-5). Josa & Aguado (2021) adopt a similar approach, arguing that the discipline of civil engineering could significantly benefit from the interdisciplinary knowledge A&H can offer to tackle ‘the most overarching current problems’, because solutions can be found ‘more critically and perceptively’ (pp. 2 and 12). A further example of how A&H is being reframed by academics to fit the needs of government is Barnacle et al.’s (2020) framework they designed to capture A&H contributions. Within it they state that a ‘lack of data’ over the ‘knowledge transfer’ of activities post-graduation means A&H research is considered of lower value than STEM (Barnacle et al., 2020, p. 398), couching their defence of A&H in the terms of the Deloitte Access Economics Report (p. 412). With a focus akin to Barnacle et al. (2020), Comunian et al. (2014) explore the role A&H graduates play in the creative economy in order to exemplify the importance of these courses, the creative economy being high on the policy agenda as a success story for the UK (Comunian et al., 2014, p. 427). They highlight that ‘the main role of HEIs is in producing high quality graduates who can fit

into and be productive in the labour market’, positing that it only seems A&H graduates contribute less economically than STEM graduates because their wages are lower, not because their industries are less profitable (pp. 445-6).

My criticism of such a body of research does not rest in its content, or within an idea that the arguments put forward are misguided or false in any way, rather that they still perpetuate the importance of employability and skills in defining HE, and exemplify the hegemony of this viewpoint. Alternatives do exist, but articles that resist the dominant discourse of skills within their framing of the value of A&H are fewer in number. Hemmy & Mehta (2020) mention briefly some alternate uses, for example, A&H’s ability to provoke ‘wide... education and interests’ that can ‘solve large-scale human problems’, and the fact that most fields rely on an understanding of people, a lack of which can be ‘harmful to... society’ (p. 277). Hamman (2013) also covers how ‘material wealth’ is not the only way to ‘live a good life’, ‘literature and the arts mak[ing] people... better citizens’, requiring ‘deep creativity and intellectualism, an ability to desire and use reason, and a willingness to change your mind’ (p. 1). Similarly, Gerçeker (2018) argues how the arts can allow individuals to ‘balance and organise their emotional world’, and therefore aid individuals in developing values and contributing positively to society (p. 622). Feldt & Petersen (2021) take perhaps the most distinct approach, investigating the role of the Humanities imagination in fostering new approaches to the world’s problems. They build on the work of C. W. Mills who explored how imagination can ‘create new knowledge... perspectives... and explanations to well-known situations’, rooted in acknowledgement of the ‘dialectical and reciprocal relations between wider tendencies, larger histories and structures, and particular situations of particular people’ (Feldt & Petersen, 2021, p. 158). In other words, imagination within A&H study can allow us to connect with societal problems of the past, recognise how they relate to an understanding of one’s place in current culture and society and its meanings and materials, and imagine or construct the way forward. Feldt and Petersen (2021) advance that in this way, A&H can provoke imagination that cultivates ‘democratic, collective action’ over the more selfish ‘specific troubles people have’ (p. 158). Borrowing from humanist thought pertaining to a focus on the role and advance of the human in the world (see Davies, 1997), they assert that A&H, in particular the Humanities, is about a ‘devotion to languages in time’, studied to construct meaning and allow for the sense-making of human cultures (Feldt & Petersen, 2021, pp. 161-2). Such meanings provide the ‘glue which connects remote times and places’, and ‘makes people experience community,

beauty, love, art, good, and evil’, revealing the commonalities and differences in the universal human experience (p. 162).

### An Alternative Vision for HE

An analysis or approach such as this speaks to a wider academic debate about the purposes of education and how they should be defined. Gert Biesta is a prominent contemporary thinker in this area, publishing several articles on the topic. In one entitled ‘What is education for?’, Biesta (2015) argues that the ‘normative question of good education’ has been lost under neoliberalism in favour of more technical or competitive approaches (p. 75). He states that education needs a purpose to be effective, and that purpose is not just about the acquisition of ‘knowledge, skills and dispositions’ but also has a socialisation dimension, where people are ‘initiat[ed]’ into ‘ways of thinking and doing’, and a subjectification dimension, where people become ‘subjects of initiative and responsibility rather than objects of the actions of others’ (p. 77) (see also Biesta, 2009). He describes the ‘student as consumer’ construction as a ‘distortion’, asserting that education is a transformative process as much about defining one’s needs as fulfilling them (pp. 82-3). Elaborating on Biesta’s ideas, an arguably intrinsic part of what education can offer is the formation and cultivation of the individual or the self. In his musings on education, Philosopher Bertrand Russell (1926) states that education must encourage the will to learn the ‘ideals of human character’, defined as ‘vitality, courage, sensitiveness and intelligence’ (pp. viii and 31), and overcome the tendency to regard utility, with its propensity to attach intrinsic value to physical satisfactions, as of greater importance than moral and mental enrichment (pp. 8-9). Referencing the work of Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1762/2013) who cites that education must ‘excite... goodness, humanity, commiseration, and beneficence’ and the key skill of ‘knowing how to live with [one’s] fellow men’ (pp. 261 and 277), and John Locke’s (1922) concept of the tabula rasa, humanity’s ‘empty slate’, which should be filled with an ability to derive truth and reason over prejudice (pp. 187-8), Russell (1926/2010) emphasises the role education has in making one a more ‘excellent human being’ (p. 9). In a similar way, Gallagher (2004) contends that the functional, economically-driven model of the university, which neglects a study of culture and knowledge for its own sake, is harmful for humanity. Covering John Henry Newman’s ideas of the importance of providing wisdom and moral and intellectual development, and the Thomist approach where students are initiated into conflict and debate, Gallagher (2004) argues for the reintroduction of an emphasis on ‘active learning’, and ‘whole person’ ‘formation’ (p. 158). This is so that one can ‘be

fostered towards self-ownership and... responsible life decisions' under Ignatian pedagogy that can 'heal some of the typical wounds of our time' (pp. 158-9). Russell (1926/2010) also lends support to the idea of 'pure learning' driven by a 'desire to understand the world better', advancing that universities and their production of new knowledge in research, unfettered by ideas of utility, is imperative for mankind and the common good (p. 197).

As this last point suggests, the cultivation of the individual is also intrinsically linked with another purpose of education, that of the cultivation of the citizen and therefore the public or common good. Elucidating the links between education and democracy, Biesta (2005) advocates that adult education can 'empower individuals and groups', which in turn 'impacts upon the quality of social and political life' (p. 688). He argues that under neoliberalism, political action occurs in a way that prioritises the individual over the collective, 'ero[ding]... solidarity' and causing concern for British democracy (pp. 689-93). The model of citizen as consumer and diminishment of the public domain should therefore be counteracted with the learning of a 'public domain ethos' that allows citizens to revise societal priorities for the collective interest rather than self-interest (pp. 699-701). Russell (1932/2010) also writes about the citizen, commenting that 'social structure increasingly depends upon trained and well-informed intelligence', 'intellectual education' a 'vital necessity in the modern social order' (pp. 123-4). He expands on this by stating that a citizen requires the ability to approach complicated matters with the 'application of trained intelligence to masses of fact, rather than by prejudice, emotion, and clap-trap' (p. 123), the learning of 'genuine culture', wisdom, and formation of a 'comprehensive mind' allowing one to understand humanity and the ends it should pursue, and one to become a 'citizen of the universe' (p. 58).

A more contemporary example is Cramer's (2016) piece on the dangers of the economically focused university and the need to revive the civic purpose of HE in the US. Cramer (2016) explores how, in light of a widespread perception that universities largely operate as businesses and link themselves to economic output and workforce preparation, HE policy-makers and practitioners need to be reminded of the importance of giving people 'the skills' and 'sophisticated knowledge' 'necessary for democratic reconciliation in the face of culture difference' (p. 443). Labelling it a 'return to an important original mission' of HE institutions, Cramer (2016) states 'we have a duty to... provide people with the competencies [and understanding] necessary to participate in democracy: a willingness to listen to the "other", an ability to critically reflect, and an ability to communicate with a wide variety of other people

to share what we know' (p. 447). This corresponds to Rata (2012) who highlights the importance of fostering 'critical... and rational thinking' for enabling one to 'free [themselves] from the limitations of the immediate... [and] subjective' in order to 'understand and change [one's] circumstances', 'the power to see the world with different eyes [where] the potential for political action is contained' (p. 119; p. 108).

The notion of citizen-building links directly to Biesta's (2011) article in which he states that neoliberalism's logic of competition is 'eroding the university from the inside out', diluting and confusing its purpose from 'supporting public projects and the common good' to simply 'adapting to private interests' (pp. 42-5). Elaborating on the various conceptions of the university throughout history, he postulates that despite their differences, all conceptions are united in their belief that HE has a duty to the public or common good (p. 41). Like Biesta (2011), Marginson (2020) also criticises government for not recognising or directly valuing the public good HE can provide. Marginson (2020) defines public goods as 'a shared resource that all can utilise, not subject to scarcity or contaminated by congestion', taking both economic and political forms, the latter strongly associated with democracy (pp. 256-7). Common goods are those that 'contribute to sociable human agency, to shared social welfare... inclusion, tolerance, universal freedoms, equality, human rights, [and] individual capability' (p. 258). Marginson (2020) asserts that HE can satisfy both of these definitions through individual self-formation, societal awareness, expertise, knowledge formation, civil debate, and global cooperation (p. 251). Watty's (2006) study into the views of Australian academics corroborates the idea that alternate purposes for HE are present in the minds of those in the academy, Watty's (2006) results showing that most believed HE was currently about providing work-ready graduates, but ought to be about developing critical reasoning, fostering lifelong learning, expanding opportunities, assisting the formation of intellectual abilities and perspectives, and enhancing an individual's autonomy and integrity (p. 30).

### But What Do Students Think?

Given such an integral academic debate over the purpose of HE, an important avenue of exploration is into what students believe is the purpose of attending university, and how they perceive and value their experience. In a cross-country analysis based in Europe, Brooks et al. (2020) indicate that students were not always sure of the exact purpose of their degree, requiring indication from their lecturers as to deeper meaning and the advertised purpose of

attaining the graduate premium not always translating in a clear-cut way (p. 5). In England specifically they state that university and the opportunities it provides is strongly associated with the goal of independent living, but on a broader level the economic perspective of HE was not an adequate explanatory factor on its own (Brooks et al., 2020, pp. 8 and 11). Students also saw HE as being a ‘protected space’ where ideas can be explored to a high level enabling intellectual inquiry, which is of ‘intrinsic worth’ in itself (p. 11). The idea of the public and democratic good was also a significant factor, Brooks et al. (2020) concluding that their results demonstrated ‘the capacity of students to resist dominant policy discourse’ (pp. 11-12). On the other hand, Maringe (2006) concluded something very different, arguing that the majority of sixth-form students demonstrated a keen ‘sensitivity towards anticipated benefits... align[ing] [their] HE study to potential career paths’ (p. 476), degrees chosen in line with ‘future job opportunities’ and ability in the subject area (p. 473). This contradicts elements of McMaster’s (2019) study which postulates that enjoyment rather than utilitarian thinking plays a huge role in degree choice for school students.

Focusing on A&H specifically, Chan (2016) studied English Literature students in Hong Kong and states that many of the students had ‘fuzzy subject identities’ due to the lack of a direct vocational link (p. 1657), but they still identified qualities in themselves that their studies had provided, for example, ‘empathy and criticality’ (p. 1664). Alongside this, the students said they had ‘attained wider and deeper understanding/thinking’ and developed ‘a better thought-out value system in life’, mapping onto ‘personality development’ (p. 1663). Despite this, there was an ‘issue of impracticability’, many concerned that their subject is ‘irrelevant and obsolete’ (pp. 1664 and 1668). Ferguson (2020), in documenting how A&H undergraduates found the process of researching, made a direct comparison to STEM stating her participants perceived their research as not as worthy nor as applicable as STEM research. Others were more positive, Thomson et al. (2020) revealing the high regard school students studying the arts had for the subjects. At this stage, they state that ‘discussions about careers were often vague’, but students did perceive a link between the arts and the way in which they live and want to live in the future (p. 550). Despite their parents being ‘worried’ about their choice and being ‘conscious’ of a subject ‘hierarchy’, Thomson et al. (2020) stated that students saw the arts as a ‘desirable curriculum ‘other’’, bringing them a ‘sense of freedom’ and allowing for ‘self-expression’ and a deeper ‘self-understanding’ (pp. 551 and 553). Students ‘resented and usually rejected’ a ‘denigration’ of the arts, gesturing to the ‘habits’ of ‘discipline, self-criticism, team-work and independence’ the arts had provided, habits key to ‘success’ (pp. 553-4).

Like these articles, this thesis will be focusing on the voices of A&H students, delving into their perceptions of themselves as scholars of the arts or humanities and their responses to the negativity their subjects are currently receiving. Within this, the thematic threads of neoliberalism and the marketisation of HE; the conception of student as consumer; questions and debates over the purpose of HE; and what A&H can offer the world will be woven together and analysed. In this way, under the heading of ‘understanding how A&H students perceive their choice of degree subject’, the research questions I will be answering are as follows:

1. To what extent have the discourses of ‘student as consumer’ and ‘low value’ embedded themselves within student perceptions?
2. To what extent do neoliberal discourses shape student perceptions of the university and their place in it?
3. In what ways do students conceptualise the value of their degree subjects?
4. How dominant is the ‘low value’ discourse within such conceptualisations?

In constructing and answering such research questions, the concept of a discourse is central and binds the themes together. By using the theorisations of Foucault, in conversation with Bernstein, Bourdieu, and other authors who have built upon Foucault’s work, one is able to expose how the power of, in this case, neoliberal ideology shapes the thoughts, actions, and perceptions of individuals. As such, their literature forms the basis of my conceptual framework and informs my analysis, requiring elucidation.

#### Foucault’s Concept of Discourse: Exploring the workings of power in society

Rather than attempting to provide an overview of the entirety of Foucault’s work, I will cover aspects of his philosophy that are pertinent to the themes of this thesis, beginning with providing an understanding of his philosophical approach. As stated by Rabinow (1984), Foucault does not quest for a universal understanding or truth, rather situates his analyses by historicising any ‘grand abstractions’ of human nature he may encounter (p. 4). In his own words, in order to answer the question he highlights as important, that of ‘what are we today?’, Foucault tries to use an ‘historical analysis of the relationships between our thought and our practices in Western society’ (Foucault, 1994/2020, p. 403). Once acted upon, Foucault provides intriguing tools with which to unpick the complexities of societal relations, ideology,



politics, economics, and knowledge; and expose how power runs through them and shapes them. In this way, humanity is not essentialised and the factors and forces that mould us are exposed.

An example of Foucault's historical approach is in *Discipline and Punish* (1975/2020), a work exploring the control and power relations in institutions such as the prison, school, or factory across history. Within this Foucault traces the gradual deployment of power within time through the invention, for example, of the timetable in which 'temporal dispersal is brought together to produce a profit' (p. 160), enforcing time's effective usage by individual members of society. Gradually such a concept is embodied, action adherent to a 'prearranged code', and an individual is disciplined (p. 166). When applied to today, this can be observed in the compulsion to be a productive member of society and, in this context, to view HE as a method of fulfilling that goal, one's time at university configured to be productive in intent. Furthermore, Foucault looks at the development of the examination as an invisible form of power where the subject or individual is made visible through observation, measured in marks to certain criteria, and is held 'in a mechanism of objectification' and 'domination' (p. 187). This is an experience any student, or indeed university administrator, could relate to, and through particular criteria, a certain goal can be defined and pursued. In the expansion of capitalism, Foucault states that society has become one of both external and internal surveillance (panopticism), where, if 'subjected to a field of visibility', an individual becomes 'the principle of his own subjection' (p. 203), meaning one is 'integrated into [the].. general demands' of norms and hierarchised accordingly (pp. 222-3).

Touching on power directly, Foucault approaches the ideas of governmentality and the formation of the subject. For Foucault, building upon the topics covered in *Discipline and Punish*, the art of governmentality in his contemporary world is intrinsically linked to the economy. In much the same way a father would ensure the welfare of his family, he argues that the state must introduce the economy into its political practice to ensure the welfare of the entire society (Foucault, 1994/2020, p. 207). In the need to do so, each individual, their wealth and behaviour, is subject to the exercise of 'attentive' surveillance and control (p. 207), observable to some degree in the argument that ensuring high value degrees is the government's way of caring for the future prosperity of students and, therefore, society. Linked to this field of surveillance is the form of power that Foucault states 'makes individuals subjects' (p. 331). This has two strands, one being made subject through control and

dependence, and one made subject through a labelled identity, or a ‘law of truth’, that is imposed to mark out one’s individuality (p. 331). This identity is then recognised by others and embeds itself in one’s conscience and realm of self-knowledge, division based on identity exercised between individuals and within one’s self as a form of control (p. 331).

Comparing the current state to pastoral power, Foucault analyses how, in the process of ensuring people’s welfare in this world (as opposed to the ‘next world’ as a pastor would), the public and market-run state apparatuses necessarily increase in potency (pp. 334-5). Thus, these institutions allow for the simultaneous use of totalisation procedures, referring to the management of an entire population, and individualising techniques, referring to the identity shaping outlined above (p. 332). In this sense, Foucault states that society is governed in ‘an increasingly controlled, more rational, and economic process of adjustment’, combining ‘productive activities, communications networks, and the play of power relations’ (p. 339). Therefore, ‘power relations’ are increasingly ‘rooted in the whole network of the social’ (p. 345), relationships between state and individual, individual and group, and individual and themselves defining and structuring ‘the possible field[s] of action’ (p. 341). And, indeed, these fields of action are based upon the utility of the individual in reference to the state, how one can ‘do something for the strength of the state’ (p. 409).

So far, this paints a rather negative and restricting picture of what it means to be a member of society, however, as recognised by Ball, an integral part of Foucault’s analysis rests in the role of freedom within such an arrangement of power (Ball, 2013, p. 4). He posits that at the ‘heart of power relations’ must exist a form of subordination and possibility of resistance, in other words, the potential for a ‘strategy of struggle’ (Foucault, 1994/2020, p. 346). Hence, the target for human thought becomes to liberate one’s self from both the state and the forms of power that manipulate one’s sense of self and limit one’s imagination, subjectivity freed from subjectification (p. 336). This delicate dynamic is one this thesis explores in relation to students of the A&H, trying to understand how much their psyche is dominated by the ideas put forward by government, and the ideologies intrinsic to our society, and in what ways they resist.

Intrinsic to such an exploration is the final concept of Foucault’s I will elucidate, that of discourse. Foucault’s particular definition of discourse is largely unpacked in his foundational work, *The Archaeology of Knowledge* (1969/2002) in which he untangles the complex web of knowledge, rhetoric, “truth” and power as defined and shaped throughout history. Situating his

work in relation to a history of ideas, thought, science, or knowledge, he begins by debunking any notion that the classification of areas of knowledge is apolitical, our very conception of how knowledge comes about throughout history, and in what intellectual space it exists, informed by a politicised conception of the world (pp. 23-5). Instead, because our world is constantly evolving and subject to different societal pressures, rules and conditions, 'pre-existing forms of continuity... must remain in suspense' if one is to perceive trends of human thought clearly (p. 28). To comprehend, therefore, any unity between sets of knowledge or ideas is to understand the work of discourse within them that may or may not be continuous and may or may not change over time.

Elusive, slippery and ephemeral, approaching a definition of discourse is not straightforward. One of the first Foucault provides alludes to the way discourse silently prefaces and permeates all things, articulated and hovering in the 'semi-silence' that precedes its active formation and expression (p. 28). This implies discourse has a pivotal and defining influence over all things (material or otherwise) and leads us to his key statement that discourses are 'practices that systematically form the objects of which they speak' (p. 54). Returning to the classification of knowledge, this means that an idea or text can be understood through the 'interplay of relations within it and outside it' that afford their 'mutual functioning... reciprocal determination... and independent or correlative transformation' (p. 32). In other words, our perception of the unity of a body of knowledge, and the knowledge itself, is created through a discourse that is determined by the time and space it emerges and is transformed within, identifiable through the regularity, order, or certain rules within its form (pp. 36; 41). These rules can be illuminated by understanding why certain knowledge emerged at a particular moment in time, requiring an acknowledgement that statements always exist in and are informed by an 'enunciative' 'network of [other] statements', their 'coordinates' and 'material status' part of their 'intrinsic characteristics' (pp. 111-3). Hence, no object or body of knowledge is pure or natural, existing outside some realm of power. Such power largely extends from institutions, economic and social processes, behavioural patterns and systems of norms, but in the process disguises itself and appears to create objects in a 'field of exteriority', petitioning their general acceptance (p. 50). This relates to Foucault's conception of the interplay between power and truth, the action of something being accepted as true embedded in 'the systems of power that produce and sustain' statements of "truth", namely, institutions that proffer 'great political and economic apparatuses' (Foucault, 1994/2020, pp. 131-2). This makes "truth" ideological, superstructural and a 'condition of the formation and development of capitalism' (p. 132). In this way,

discourse operates at a ‘preconceptual level’, not necessarily just within the concepts produced, but in defining the limits within which a concept is produced, allowing for some contradiction between or heterogeneity within ideas (Foucault, 1969/2002, p. 67). A discourse can then be reproduced and reinforced by various subjects in various ways, through text, spoken word, or modes of regulation, and within the contextual receiving of such reproductions.

To summarise, Foucault states that a discourse is defined as ‘a group of sequences of signs, in as far as they are statements, that is, in so far as they can be assigned particular modalities of existence’, the ‘law [or system] of such a series’ called a ‘discursive formation’ (pp. 120-1). In being articulated or enunciated, a statement is ‘used, disappears, allows or prevents the realisation of a desire, serves or resists various interests, participates in challenge and struggle, and becomes a theme of appropriation or rivalry’ (p. 118). Vocalising that a certain degree is low value, that funding must be cut, or that students must be guaranteed value for money are examples of such statements. Hence, the role of Foucault’s analytical approach in HE pivots upon an understanding of how economic and political context, the history of economic and political thought, the history of the university and conceptions of its purpose within historical context, the knowledge produced within the university, and the political knowledge that sustains it, all link and influence the creation of each other in an accumulative and politicised way. Thus, one could say that discourse has systematically formed perception of the student as consumer, or the “object” in Foucault’s language, for it speaks it into existence through these realms of truth produced over time. Hence, such a conceptualisation informs the interventions, regulations and governmental decisions surrounding it, contributing to a perception and portrayal of the arts and humanities as low value. Discourse can therefore be seen to dictate an underlying logic that pervades neoliberal ideas, the marketisation of HE, a student’s role, the purpose of university, and the function of the A&H within it. For example, the university can be structured as a neoliberal entity designed to simply produce employable individuals to enhance the economy, students then seeing a degree as an investment which will secure them financial labour market returns. Students then mould themselves as consumers and act accordingly. Such can be the power of a discourse, that to think outside of a certain discursive practice is ‘virtually impossible’, one must be ‘beyond comprehension and... reason’ (Ball, 2013, p. 20), so to glean what level of grip this particular discourse has over students is integral to my analysis.

Recognising that an explicit mention of the role education plays in production and transmission of discourse is largely missing in Foucault’s work (Bernstein, 2009, p. 126), Bernstein builds upon his ideas to explore this mechanism. Bernstein formulates the concept of symbolic control to describe the role of class relations within discourse production, members of the ruling class becoming agents of symbolic control who use ‘elaborate codes’ to define, include and exclude (p. 11/19). Such a concept exposes the reciprocal relationship between power and discourse, and how they influence forms of consciousness, social relations, and dispositions (p. 126-7). In the context of HE, this emphasises the role of prominent voices and intellectuals within the ruling class whose ‘objective relation to education is more likely... a concern for its output... [that is, an] appropriately trained work force’ (p. 134). In light of this concern and as a result of capitalism and neoliberal ideas, Bernstein states education has become ‘vocationalised’, ‘dependent’ upon ‘the needs of the economic field and... ruled by principles derived from that field’ (p. 145), the market the ‘key orientating criterion for selection of discourses’ (p. 147). Moreover, education becomes a key target in policy and rhetoric, any failure in the economy ‘blamed on the failure of education to provide relevant skills’ (p. 145). This explains the growing emphasis on employability and skill-development within HE.

The dominance of discourse within larger pedagogical instruments that Bernstein highlights problematises how students of all ages are being formed and influenced, (exemplified in Bernstein, 1999), relating to Foucault’s idea of self-regulation, that the social order becomes ‘constituent’, not just ‘regulative of the individual’ (Bernstein, 2009, p. 256). In *Pedagogy, Symbolic Control and Identity*, Bernstein (1996) expands on the substantive effect discourse and education has in this embedment of ‘knowledge systems’ within ‘consciousness’ (p. 17). Distinguishing between power as the thing that ‘creates... [and] legitimises... boundaries between... categories of agents’, and control that ‘establishes [the] legitimate forms of communication’ within said categories, Bernstein establishes control as that which ‘socialises individuals into [particular] relationships’ (p. 19). As context (i.e. history, politics economics etc.) shifts, it sends ripples into the way power and control operate and causes discourses to ‘move’, this crucial ‘recontextualising process’ creating the space in which ‘ideology [can]... play’ (p. 24). For example, in the shift towards neoliberal governance, the production of meanings shifted, and the ideology of neoliberalism could weave its way into society’s conceptualisation of the individual. In this case, the student can be constructed and therefore

construct themselves as a consumer of HE to guarantee employment. Such a production of meanings is generated within pedagogic discourse, a discourse constructed of one that provides certain skills, and one that defines social order for students of all ages (p. 46). Brown (2015) also employs Foucault to emphasise the soft power neoliberalism uses in constructing subjects, describing it as ‘termite-like’, burrowing into everyone and everything, destructing and reconstructing as it goes. Portrayed as ‘sophisticated common sense’, individuals are constructed in terms of the market and are encouraged to configure their lives around ‘strategic decisions and practices related to enhancing [one’s]... future value’, and therefore, recognising the role of HE in its escalation and embodiment, the lure of human capital and *homo economicus* takes precedence and undoes any other construction such as *homo politicus* or the individual as citizen.

In the case of this thesis, the specific subset of discourse I am studying is that which is disseminated, constructed, and existent within the policies related to ‘low value courses’, and the role of policy is one that has been explored significantly. In an analysis of the power of language in symbolic control and identity construction, Bourdieu (1977) discusses the importance of legitimacy in ‘confirm[ing] or transform[ing] the vision of the world and thereby action in the world’ (p. 117). He states that the power of words to command and to order rests upon ‘the legitimacy of the words and of him who utters them’, which relates to the influence policy, produced by an authoritative figure, has in reshaping things.

A key thinker in this field is Stephen Ball who developed the concept of policy as discourse. In conducting a literary review of his work, Lingard and Sellar (2013) essentialise his contribution as a ‘critical approach to understanding actual policy making and policy processes’ as messy, multidirectional, and occurring in multiple contested spaces, its construction, dissemination, and practice dependent upon many local contexts (p. 268). As such, ‘policy is both text and action’, its practice ‘complex and unstable’ and enacted with ‘a trialectic of dominance, resistance and chaos/freedom’, but policy as discourse still frames ‘what can be said and who can speak in respect to policy’ (p. 269). Ball (1993) describes the dependency and messiness of policy as ‘ad hocery’, understanding that policy is never just as is, rather ‘always in a state of becoming’, reliant on ‘interpretational and representational history’, the ‘text and its readers’ all having ‘histories’ (pp. 10-2). Therefore, he states policy texts ‘enter rather than simply change power relations’ (p. 13). Furthermore, policy acts both as and in discourse, meaning one ‘take[s] up the position constructed for [one] within policies’,

and one ‘may only be able to conceive the possibilities of response in and through the language, concepts and vocabulary which the discourse makes available to us’ (p. 15). To an extent, then, Ball (2015) states that, despite some room for resistance, ‘policy does us’ (p. 307), largely ‘produced and formed by taken-for-granted and implicit knowledges and assumptions about the world and ourselves’ (p. 311), which are then reproduced through responses taken.

Reflecting upon policy work in the past few decades, Ball (1998 & 2017) recognises how certain policy narratives, that is, policies that share similar vocabularies (like Foucault’s ‘rules’ of discourse), have constructed people as ‘neoliberal subjects’, and framed certain social areas as problems in the way discourse does, forming them as problems through expressing them as problems. Through the infallibility of the ‘market solution’ forming a ‘master narrative’, the need for a highly skilled workforce in order to compete internationally in a global knowledge economy dominates government thinking, education taking the blame for that goal not being fulfilled, and being reformed to best achieve that goal (Ball, 1998, p. 126). Using this discourse, which is influenced by think tanks, entrepreneurial firms, and global actors, the logic of labelling society’s lack of skills as a problem (because of schools and universities) goes unquestioned. Therefore, any proposed solutions within this discursive formation are seen as reasonable next steps that just make sense. Returning to Bernstein (1996), the observation he makes of current trends is that the state is eroding the autonomy of pedagogical institutions to produce pedagogic discourse, which is demonstrable through policy. In this way, the regulative discourse, that is the rules of social order, produce the ‘order in the instructional discourse’, or the boundaries of what and how students are taught (p. 48). He specifies that the state has less of a direct role in HE discourse, but argues that funding indirectly gears research and teaching towards certain areas.

Expanding on such work, Bailey (2013) adapts Foucault’s concept of the *dispositif* to describe policy. In essence, *dispositif* captures the interaction of discourse and material culture, or the manifestation of power dynamics in physical objects and practices. Bailey (2013) advances that this emphasises the non-discursive as well as discursive elements of policy within a framework that understands the socio-technical formation of “government”, or in other words, under what political rationality government conducts itself and enacts control. For neoliberal governments, this means individuals are ‘incite[d]... to govern themselves’ to the ‘requirements... of the state’ in an ‘artificially arranged liberty’ (p. 816). Hence, one is expected and manipulated to behave as an entrepreneurial, competitive, and economically

rational individual, students constructed as shrewd investors with a responsibility for their future, the access to which is promised in a material sense through student loan companies. In a similar way, Scheurich (1994) highlights the centrality of subject-forming in how policy disciplines populations, the construction of problem groups teaching individuals what actions to avoid if they are to become productive, “successful”, and disciplined neoliberal citizens.

Biesta (2013) notices this idea within the policy language of lifelong learning, which he states puts the onus on individuals to use education to adjust to the demands of the global economy. Whilst examining physical manifestations of policy within school texts and artefacts, Maguire et al. (2011) recognise that things such as posters, handbooks and student diaries influence and push a certain discourse, that of the ‘good student’ who is guaranteed success through motivation to achieve. More broadly, this demonstrates how certain goals and decision-making processes become normalised and fulfil the dominant discourse of education’s purpose. Another physical manifestation is the league table, as has been referred to earlier in the literature review, that, through the lens of Foucault, can be seen to cultivate constant surveillance (panopticism), normalise the validity of certain measurements to define excellence, and thus increase the hegemony of the neoliberal logic. Biesta (2014) argues that the misleading rhetoric of consumer choice within this neoliberal logic restricts subjects to only being able to choose ‘from a set menu’ (p. 52), rather than democratically influence what is on the menu in the first place, and hence students are being herded into choosing from the set menu of subjects deemed worthy and guarantors of “success”. Ball (2017) highlights that subject hierarchy is integral to policy that aims to equip the UK for global competition, HE relied upon for innovation and skill-development above all, the skills formula disseminated and led by UK government and global organisations such as the OECD and World Bank. Indeed, many research papers and policy-advisory documents produced to bolster and defend the A&H sector take to emphasising the skills A&H can provide for business, enterprise, and the economy at large, tightening the grip these discourses have over our understanding of HE (see, The British Academy (2017); The British Academy (2020); & A&H Research Council (2009)).

Choosing the brazen policy decision to cut funding, that generated much controversy and debate, allows for the discourses to be uncovered and detangled, shedding light on their intricate and pervasive operation. Understanding students own identification and relation to such policy decisions and discourses then becomes a method of exploring their power, and



Foucault can be employed to shake-up and dust-off the limitations and boundaries neoliberalism places on us as members of HE, paving a new way forward.

## **Methodology**

### **Constructing the Study**

In constructing my research methodology, the most prudent option was to perform a case study of students from a particular institution. For convenience of access, recruitment from the University of Oxford made sense, however, as some of my interview questions and aspects of my study centred around the labour market and employability, Oxford's status as an institution presented some difficulties. As an elite institution, it was a potential that participants would be less concerned about employment due to the reputational advantage a degree from Oxford is colloquially likely to give, therefore, the University of Exeter was chosen instead. Although it is a Russell Group university, Exeter occupies a lower position in the university rankings so does not have quite the same level of prestige. Their student population is also large, and they provide a wide range of A&H courses, offering enough potential scope for the study. Furthermore, as an Exeter alumni myself, and given the time constraints, I had far more points of contact I could draw on for recruitment using, for example, a social media group of all current undergraduates and graduates from the university.

Recruitment itself was done via advertisement within the social media group, and was very successful, receiving a lot of traction due to social media being one of the preferred methods of communication for younger generations. Another method of recruitment used was snowballing, asking current participants to put me into contact with relevant course-mates and/or friends. Potential participants reached out to me via email and Teams meetings were arranged that were audio-recorded and transcribed, online interviews chosen due to the timing of the study, namely that it was out of term-time meaning most students were off campus. Online interviews can also put participants more at ease as they can be interviewed in their home environments. The demographic stipulated in recruitment was that students were either undertaking or had recently completed (within 1-2 years) an undergraduate degree in A&H, were under the age of 25, and that they were so-called home students, paying home fees. Ensuring students completed degrees within a similar time period and were of a similar age controlled for what types of discourses and environments they may have been exposed to, and the stage of life (in terms of work experience, thus, employability) they were likely to be in, which could affect their potential motivations for studying. The decision to exclude international students was on the basis that a difference in fee payment (with international fees

being up to treble that of home students), might affect how they perceived the magnitude of the investment they were making. This then might affect their attitude to careers, making fee status a variable that lay outside the scope of the study. The resulting pool of participants was as follows:

Name (Pseudonym)	Degree Studied	Current Status
Ellie	BA Drama	Graduate
Paris	BA Drama	Graduate
Charlotte	BA English	2 <sup>nd</sup> Year Undergraduate
Charlie	BA English	2 <sup>nd</sup> Year Undergraduate
Sidarthur	BA English	2 <sup>nd</sup> Year Undergraduate
Rosa	BA English and Management	3 <sup>rd</sup> Year Undergraduate
Louise	BA English and Drama	Graduate
Julia	BA English and Drama	Graduate
Arthur	BA History	Graduate
Oliver	BA History	3 <sup>rd</sup> Year Undergraduate
Miles	BA History	3 <sup>rd</sup> Year Undergraduate
Jan	BA History	Graduate
Joan	BA History and Ancient History	3 <sup>rd</sup> Year Undergraduate
Angel	BA Liberal Arts	2 <sup>nd</sup> Year Undergraduate

The total number of participants was 14, a number consistent with similar qualitative studies of this kind, and had a good mix of degree subjects. Although not controlled for, the mix of gender was close to even between male and female-identifying students. As data referred to personal experiences, pseudonyms were chosen by participants to protect their identity.

### Choosing Interview-Based Research

My decision to conduct interviews was due to their ability to provide richness, depth and detail to research, and open up the possibility of unanticipated data (Mack et al., 2005, p. 4; Sutton, 2011, p. 111). The interviews were semi-structured to leave space for further questioning of a particular point, and allow the interaction to more organically play out. My rationale was that, if I wanted to capture the presence or non-presence of certain discourses I had to allow my

participants some room for creativity in answering my questions. In order to make analysis easier, and note down any adjustments to the interview process I should make going forward, I kept a log as I went along. This became helpful when, early on, I adjusted one of my questions from ‘what do you think...?’ about this discourse to ‘how do you feel...?’, the latter pertinent for revealing more deeply held emotional responses that bypassed any need they may have had to intellectualise their answers, which could distance the students from their responses. The ability to gauge body language, facial expression, and tone of voice in this instance added to the efficiency of the interview method for measuring emotion (Johnson & Christensen, 2020, p. 170).

Before interviews took place, I decided to email my participants a selection of articles concerning the policy decision and low value discourse in question. This decision was not taken lightly due to a possibility of reproducing the very discourse I was trying to measure, a common problem in discourse-based research (Cameron & Panović, 2014, p. 11). This was also considered in my choice of questions, which centred around why they chose their degree subject; how they saw their degrees in relation to their careers; what their response was to the discourse; what they thought governmental perspective may be; and what valuable contributions A&H made to society. For example, by asking about and using the term ‘career’ I could be reiterating an idea that degree choice should be linked to lifelong job projection, and by directly referring to ‘low value’, I could be introducing students to a discourse they were not previously aware of, muddying my results. However, such a choice allowed me to stimulate discussion and get to the crux of what I was measuring, providing focus to a study that sits in a broad research area. By using quite open lines of questioning in relation to the discourse, I could also ensure that students were free to respond in any way they saw fit, therefore not hindering their subjectivity. Furthermore, directly questioning students about policy and discourse is also a method I have not personally encountered, but I believe holds merit because students are able to consciously respond to an issue that affects and impacts them, which gives them agency.

### Positionality

Acknowledged to be a complex process involving many potentially influencing factors (Edwards & Holland, 2013, p. 92), interviewing my participants required great cognizance and dexterity around my positionality as a researcher. As stated by Berger (2015), positionality

relates to ‘turning.. the researcher lens back onto oneself’ (p. 220) and critical self-evaluation to expose any presupposed biases one might bring to the study (Yow, 1997, p. 71). Acknowledging my own ‘political and personal baggage’ meant understanding that (Mendez, 2021, p.5), as a graduate in the humanities myself, I have strong support for A&H and personally disagree with the ‘low value’ moniker. However, I was careful to be neutral in my questioning and my data analysis, making room for data I did not expect, to counteract this and enhance rigour.

Aside from my positionality in relation to my research, my positionality in relation to my participants was also important. The formality of interviews means there is potential for participants to adapt their responses, somewhat concealing subjectivity (Walford, 2001, p. 90; Robson & McCartan, 2016, p. 285). Furthermore, as recognised by Cameron & Panović (2014), in acknowledgement of how discourse operates, individuals are always ‘making choices and calculations about how to present themselves’ (p. 8). This became clear in some of my interviews as I was asked whether what they’d said was ‘ok’, in acknowledgement that I was a researcher presumably wanting certain answers. To mitigate this, I reassured participants that the data I wanted was simply a reflection of how they truly felt and thought about things, with no expectations on my part. My ‘insider’ status as an Exeter alumna was also helpful in establishing rapport, making my participants more comfortable, and thus making them more inclined to be open (Berger, 2015, p. 220, p. 223) and, as a result, my participants appeared happy and generally thanked me at the end of the interview for an enjoyable conversation.

### Analysis

Drawing upon the work of Adair & Pastori (2011) and Terry et al. (2017), the first step in analysing my data was to conduct a Bahktin-informed thematic analysis. This meant a close reading of the data to detect subtleties, and an approach that looked for similarities between participants in terms of the topics they touched upon. In doing so, I coded my data inductively, keeping in mind my theoretical lens and research focus but approaching the data with no presumption of what I would find. In doing so, I was careful to keep the ‘voice’ of my participants as pure and unfiltered as possible so as not to allow my interpretation to manipulate their meaning (Warriner & Anderson, 2017, p. 306). Once I had determined my themes, I used the work of Fairclough (1995) and Warriner & Anderson (2017) as a guide for employing

critical discourse analysis. For this, I used Foucault's work on discourse and the relationship between power, language, expression, and truth to find the ideologies lying underneath the students' vocabulary choices and statement formations. This required constant acknowledgement of context within speech and the pressures that might influence the participants to form responses in certain ways. In presenting the data I was thus able to detect and explain to what extent the 'low value' discourse was embodied and reproduced. I also made sure to split my presentation of the data into two sections: the "raw" data, and a discussion. This allowed for me to mix my semantic coding with my latent coding, that is, my use of the explicit sentences and words expressed and used by my participants, categorised to form a cogent narrative, and my theoretically-driven analysis of the implicit meanings in such word choices. In other words, my data analysis could be both emic and etic, making sure to clearly present the viewpoints of the social group whilst applying my theoretical perspective as an observer in relation to the literature. Such a process borrowed from Mazzei & Jackson (2012), who describe 'plugging-in' to one's data as a way to decentre theory and data from one's analysis, rather, balancing both. An example of doing so involves the inclusion of 'out-of-field' data, which I did regularly, incorporating conversation I had with my participants outside of the official interview in my analysis, thus making my analysis more organic and less limited by my framework.

### Limitations

Due to time constraints, the range of this study was quite limited. For example, most of the students I interviewed studied a humanities degree, only four involved in an arts degree, and the restriction of recruitment to one university reduced the diversity of the student body and their experiences. Moreover, as recruitment required participants to reach out to me, it is possible that some approached the study due to an already present political and emotional investment in the topic, skewing results. However, as one student approached me due to his dissatisfaction with his degree, rather than a desire to defend A&H, this concern is somewhat mitigated.

### Socioeconomic Background as an Explanatory Factor

A crucial decision made early on in my study was to exclude socioeconomic background as a variable. Although much fruitful research has been conducted on the influence of class in how students approach university (due to the expense, level of debt and effect of social and cultural capital), a study that investigated the relationship between socioeconomic background and attitudes towards A&H would've been too broad in the time available. Furthermore, excluding such a variable did not overtly interfere with the measuring of presence of discourse within student's perspectives. However, the urgency to include such a variable and lens of analysis became clear in some of the responses I encountered in my data. Despite the choice to leave out the theme of 'class' to ensure a clear narrative and focus for my analysis, many students pointed out that such a policy, alongside the 'low value' rhetoric, was likely to disproportionately impact those from a lower socio-economic background. They reasoned that, if it was stated that such a degree wouldn't get one a job, and if there were less places available, certain demographics would be discouraged from applying, and struggle to get a place even if they did. The student's assertion of the importance of student loans in deciding how confident they'd feel in studying A&H adds to these ideas. The ramifications suggested from these findings upon widening participation deserve further research.

### Further Research

In response to the prescience of a socioeconomic influential on attitudes towards A&H, my study opens several avenues to investigate this. For example, one could compare student responses from different types of institution, or use socioeconomic status as an independent variable. Alternatively, a comparison of students of different ethnicities and from different cultural backgrounds, including international students for example, could be illuminating in showing how the neoliberal Western approach that valorises STEM informs student perspectives. In terms of developing upon themes that arose in my study, the ubiquity of a negative discourse surrounding A&H that my participants mentioned had been present throughout schooling, and in discussions with others, could be investigated further. My data also touched upon a broader question of what students perceive the purpose of university to be, and whether this lies within a neoliberal construction or not, which could warrant direct research.

## Data Analysis

### 1 – The Environment of Negativity

Beginning by gauging the prevalence of the discourse, the level of awareness every student had of the negativity directed at the Arts and Humanities, both in their immediate environments and in society at large, was one of the most striking elements to emerge from the data. Although only half were aware of the precise policy referenced, all expressed a cognizance of the ‘low value’ rhetoric and the terms and policies that have come with it, such as “Mickey Mouse degrees”, retraining initiatives, and widespread defunding agendas. In response to conversation of the funding cuts, Liberal Arts student Angel commented that she was unsurprised, for pushing people towards STEM has become ‘a common policy’. For most, this impression of dissonance between STEM and A&H, in particular the Arts, began as early as primary school, the way subjects were timetabled and taught positioning the Arts, according to Louise, as ‘not as important or a priority’. Indeed, if some did attend schools that were more supportive of A&H, they recognised this was unusual, Drama student Paris stating that ‘a lot of schools don’t even have a Drama department’. Ellie described the jokes and concern around the future of Drama in her school as definitely having ‘an impact’ and Joan, although praising her school’s historically focused curriculum that drove her passion, said that there was still a push to sacrifice the Arts and ‘focus on getting the grades that [she] need[ed]’. This was similarly phrased by Rosa, who recalled that the ‘focus’ was to ‘do well in the science, the hard subjects’ rather than the Arts, the phraseology indicative of the split between the so-called “hard” skills STEM provides and “soft” skills from A&H as will be explored in Section 3. Together, these statements demonstrate the extent to which such a perception of subject disparity has been ever-present in student’s lives.

Similarly ubiquitous was the concern of family and friends over the student’s choices to study A&H. In considering a History degree, Rosa was told by her mother she had ‘better do a science subject’ as otherwise she would ‘not... find a job’, as was Charlotte, the idea being that the humanities were ‘completely useless’ and would ‘not help you in life’. In these cases it was clear that the choice to study A&H was far from easy, requiring some form of resistance to the dominant perception that choosing A&H is ‘risky’, Oliver even stating he has to actively and ‘continually defend [his] interest in History’ to his family. When making the ‘nerve-wracking’



switch from applying for a degree in Business to a BA in English and Drama, Louise described the incredulity of those around her, her friends questioning her decision:

People at Sixth Form were like “oh, are you sure you’ve made the right decision?... You’re narrowing yourself... why are you screwing yourself over?”

For Miles, the discouragement they received when considering an Archaeology degree, namely that it would be ‘undervalued’ by employers and ‘never find [her] a job’, prompted her to actually make the change to a BA in History, the negative discourse demonstrably prevalent amongst many groups, parents and students.

Perhaps the most striking was how students described the relentless derision of their subject from their peers, to the extent where some seemed to absorb and reiterate the negative perceptions themselves. A commonly mentioned perception was that A&H graduates are destined for unemployment, which Julia said emerges in conversational competition among students as to who is in the worse position, something she pithily described as the ‘misery Olympics’. A constant message for Joan has been that art is a pathway for ‘fools’ because ‘there’s no money in it’, leaving an impression that A&H is ‘frivolous’ compared to the importance of STEM. The exposure to such a stereotype is high, many taking it as a given saying ‘well obviously everyone says...’, and indeed, Louise believes, due to certain comments from her interviewers, that she was refused several jobs based on her choice of degree. Furthermore, Ellie observed that many of her course-mates had abandoned any continuation of Drama in favour of a less ‘fragile future’, demonstrating that unemployment perceptions are somewhat based in reality, but such is their magnitude that they pre-empt behaviour which takes students away from A&H.

Beyond graduate utility, many described a feeling of being made to be the joke in a situation. Ellie stated that she always expects ‘a laugh or a face’ or some form of insult when she says she does Drama, causing her doubt over her choice, and a feeling of humiliation. History student Oliver also shared that people say he’s ‘not doing a real subject’, rather wasting time messing around, which is now being echoed by government voices. Charlotte was keenly aware of negative societal representations of A&H students, that they are ‘pretentious’, ‘contribute nothing’ and choose courses that require less intellectual rigour. Jan and Louise voiced similar

ideas, stating that they're seen as 'lazy' and 'less intelligent' than STEM students. Charlotte thus believes that:

'because the public perceives us as being less worthy we... instinctively make fun of ourselves'.

It seems, therefore, that many A&H students proceed with their choices despite being fully aware of the negativity that surrounds them. In this vein, Ellie compared the situation to a 'battle', and it appears to be a battle that occurs both outside the students and within them. They must face the fact society does not deem A&H valuable and have to overcome their own discourse-induced trepidation, doubt, and indoctrination in order to pursue A&H regardless.

## 2 – Resisting the Governmental Perspective

Having made this important decision in such an environment, it is understandable that, when confronted with the policies and vocabulary used by government, the students reacted with visible emotion. Almost all expressed a feeling of shock, disbelief, worry, and frustration, accusing the government of being 'short-sighted', 'narrow-minded', and 'silly', their viewpoint 'appalling'. Although most said it was unlikely that their decision to study A&H would've changed in light of certain policy-decisions and government rhetoric, they did say it might have made them 'think twice', and expressed concern that it would put other students off. Louise stated that the government's actions could be 'really damaging' and lead to what Arthur described as a 'waste of potential', Ellie conveying a fear that A&H will 'just die out'. Clearly for most, their resistance against the negativity engenders a deep investment in their subjects and choices, which is reiterated in the fact that all 14 students said they chose to study A&H out of enjoyment of the subjects. Many were keen to articulate their happiness, passion, and love for their course, citing a greater understanding of people, flexibility of learning, and creativity as large pull factors.

Given this, when asked about their feelings towards the government's stance on the purpose of university, many voiced disagreement with an approach that devalues enjoyment in favour of utility and, as stated by Julia, 'mak[es] a business out of something that shouldn't... be a business in the first place'. The way the government refers to HE made Julia feel it was 'like a factory', turning the 'immature teenager' into the 'employable person', exploited for money.

Arthur and Oliver asserted similar sentiments, astute to and critical of the process of marketisation within HE, Oliver stating that:

‘the devaluing of A&H degrees is nothing to do with the quality of the courses... it’s entirely to do with an ever greater push towards financialization...the just gutting of anything that really nourishes the soul’.

Others expressed such a desire for fulfilment that exists outside of the push for money and careers, Louise arguing that it is ‘one of the big misconceptions... that you do [a degree] in order to get a job... you should be studying what you want to study’. A couple of students proposed alternative purposes for university such as broadening people’s horizons, stimulating identity-building, exposing one to new experiences, and expanding world knowledge. Demonstrable in this is the underlying resentment towards the discourse of the career-focused university, and the desire for enjoyment and willingness to learn to be enough to justify attendance.

Discussing this topic led many to describe the positive impact attending university had had on them, gaining experience of supporting one’s self, being able to cultivate their passion and intellect, and developing a broader social network. Arthur stated that without university he ‘probably would’ve been less of a well-rounded individual’, and Charlie, although not entirely satisfied with his course, did say it was the ‘life stuff’ he learnt that was really ‘worthwhile’. Sidarthur concluded that university attendance was crucial for it’s ability to ‘create a more conscientious society’, positing that ‘when people are more conscientious things get better’. The weight the students attached to being in HE heightens the relative importance of having A&H degrees as options for them, without which many said it was unlikely they would’ve attended university at all.

### 3 – Why A&H? Rationalising the ‘low value’ label

However, despite the resistance to governmentally-driven viewpoints demonstrated so far, the students appeared not entirely immune to thoughts, preoccupations and worries about their careers. The general trend of responses to questions about careers was that when going into university it was not on their minds, but approaching graduation it had become more prominent. Notable was the way in which they referred to a preparation for career-planning and job

applications. Answers were peppered with specific vocabulary shared by officials within HE, such as 'skills' and 'employability', and highlighted a desire to predict what employers would want, an idea that one had to 'sell' oneself, terminology that works within neoliberal discourses. In pondering her prospects, Angel explained her decision to choose German as a minor as, in part, due to how it looked on a CV. She thought the title Liberal Arts didn't 'sound great' but with German she was presenting a 'solid degree' with a 'skill that [an employer] can take on'. Similarly, Jan was aware that doing extra Economics modules would aid employment, giving him key demonstrable skills, and Oliver stated that part of the rationale for choosing History was for its 'good set of skills that can be used in a variety of different workplaces'. Many mentioned the Careers Services, Julia's perspective as a graduate now employed by the university allowing her to observe how much the emphasis on employability, and Careers Services presence, has increased over the years. Her assertion that employability and knowledge of 'transferable skills' is 'shoved down their throats from day one', whilst simultaneously being demanded much more by the student body, highlights how, according to Julia, a cognizance of the labour market and adjustment to its demands is becoming a defining feature of university. Reflecting on her own journey in comparison to her brother's, Paris shared how her brother was in a dilemma, split between studying Engineering and Music. Even though she said he found Engineering more 'boring', and music was his passion, he was acutely concerned about employment post-graduation so was more inclined to choose Engineering, exemplifying the idea that career-planning is increasing in prevalence, to the detriment of A&H as choices.

Certainly, many were worried about their futures, Louise considering the idea that choosing English and Drama could 'mess up [her] career prospects', believing that employers would 'not... value [her] degree or appreciate what [she] can bring to the table'. Charlie was particularly apprehensive and frustrated, lamenting the lack of applicable skills his English degree offered and expressing confusion over where he could take it, this being 'one of his main grudges'. Jan thought there needed to be greater clarity over what skills one's degree can give you and what careers it opened up in order to combat such worries, for he himself was confident that a History degree could get him a job, he was just unsure in what. Alongside this, Ellie and Miles highlighted that career advice was often unhelpful if one wanted to work in a related field to their degree subject. Ellie recalled that her cohort had a recruitment talk from the police force, but nothing from 'any arts-specific drama graduate opportunities'. Similarly, Miles criticised the rhetoric that you 'can do anything with a History degree' but lack of

answers over their desire to work in the Heritage sector, the emphasis being on an academic historical career, if anything.

Aside from A&H-specific difficulties, Rosa commented that, having spoken to her housemates who studied in STEM, it isn't just A&H degrees that provoke employment worries. She argued that degrees are no longer 'a ticket to a job', degrees like Maths and Biology also 'absolutely useless' because, as voiced by Angel, 'it feels like everyone is going to university these days'. Whilst these students were critiquing this saturation and devaluation of degrees, and speculating upon alternate options they could've made, they, and others, were very aware that degrees were still required for the majority of jobs. Therefore, some described their university process as a logical but trying/trialling one. For Charlie, his choice to attend university rested partly in its status as 'the pinnacle' of achievement and a fear of being 'left behind', but the experience was unsatisfactory for:

'it's not impossible to find a job with a degree and its definitely better than not having one, but it does seem very difficult'.

Therefore, as an alternative to A&H, some considered other options to be superior. Three cited Languages as being particularly useful and important for how they signal a specific skill to an employer, and 7 mentioned the idea of doing a Law Conversion, 1 having done so, for the job security and a guaranteed high wage. These considerations, and overt concern towards future employment and employability was for some attributed to the significant expense of university, as put by Charlie, 'you're getting into a load of debt and also it's three years of your life to get something which is difficult [to employ]'. In this way, the framing of university as an 'investment' in return for a graduate premium in the labour market, and the associated discourse, has, to some extent, been internalised by students.

Given the perception that A&H degrees are negatively correlated with a return in the labour market, when asked why they thought the A&H were being targeted, it is unsurprising that the students overwhelmingly blamed an overt focus on economics from government. Arthur described the policy decision as a 'misguided money-saving tool' derived from an idea that something's value is defined by it's economic output. In this vein, Joan expressed distaste at the centrality of the 'economic factor', and a perception by government that STEM makes them more money. She stated how this revealed a 'wilful ignorance... [of] how important arts and

humanities are’ and depicted the governmental process as them ‘choosing the... easier narrative of “they’re all less important”’, and therefore ‘ignoring [A&H] in favour of the... big buck areas’. Others agreed, Miles saying that they clearly value STEM more for the workforce, Louise suggesting it’s ‘what they see as the best future for the country... [STEM degrees providing] those more... crucial jobs’, and Charlotte surmising that the government just wants ‘jobs that will make Britain more of a competitive country’, A&H side-lined because they ‘don’t let the government make profit’. Thus, even if critical, students had a perception that STEM generated higher-earning individuals and was therefore definitely more profitable for government, which explained the policy decision. Julia and Jan both cited the COVID-19 crisis as having an impact, though Julia thought this was ‘trying to fix a problem... at the expense of future structures’. Sidarthur produced perhaps the most scathing review of government and its priorities, stating that:

‘you can’t appeal to their sense of character... all you can really do is try... [and present] a balance sheet of here’s what we gain [monetarily] and here’s what we lose’.

Together, this highlighted the students’ view that the root of governmental decisions was placed in a utilitarian economic outlook without nuance, and suggests that, on some level, they agreed that A&H did provide less economically than STEM, making it (economically) lower value.

Such a point reveals that, to some degree, the discourse surrounding A&H, employment, and the economy, has embedded itself within student perceptions, which links with the ways in which they articulated A&H contributions in comparison to STEM. In conjunction with the economic reasoning, the students overwhelmingly described A&H using dichotomous and binary-driven vocabulary to comprehend its supposed inferiority to STEM. Examples were that STEM provides: ‘hard skills’ compared to ‘soft’; offers a ‘set pattern’ or ‘clear end goal’ for the labour market as opposed to being ‘wishy-washy’; is ‘quantifiable’ rather than ephemeral, providing something ‘you can’t put your finger on’; is seen as ‘concrete’ versus ‘abstract’; ‘functional’ over immeasurable; STEM degrees being ‘solid’, ‘physical’, and ‘technical’ unlike A&H. Such words are loaded with value judgements and appear to originate within a discourse that promotes STEM’s clear utility and use over A&H’s frivolity, as mentioned in Section 1. Although the students did not all agree with this interpretation, there was a general message that they understood it’s logic and why one might think that. One student was particularly

dissatisfied with his English degree for not providing recognisable skills for the workplace. Charlie's interpretation was that A&H degrees:

'aren't horribly low value, they just don't have the same real impact as skills-based ones... it doesn't feel like they've kept up with the job market'.

Although less overtly critical, Jan held similar sentiments in the way he described choosing A&H as 'closing yourself off a little bit'. His reasoning was that STEM graduates have the possibility to switch to a career in a traditional A&H sector, whereas A&H graduates do not have such an open field of job opportunities, for STEM careers require more technical training. Altogether, the idea that A&H degrees held less sway in the job market and had less to offer economically, was clearly marked in the student's responses, and gave the impression that most did think that perception held some merit.

#### 4 – Defending A&H

Despite this perception, in avid defence of their course choice, all aside from 1 could and did name the numerous useful and applicable skills their degrees had given them. Students listed writing; communication; teamwork; presentation; flexibility; project and time management skills; critical thinking; effective research; argument formation and articulation; and analytical skills as major selling points for their degrees. Other aspects mentioned were the confidence, creativity, and people skills their degrees provided, and generally, these were easily and positively recalled by the students.

Alongside a broad skillset, students also defended their degree subjects by arguing that the labour market would be unable to function without A&H graduates. Julia said she was surprised by how transferable her skills from Drama were, and that a large part of the workforce, such as admin workers, relied upon such skills. Angel stated that the people skills were A&H's biggest contribution, for all businesses and services require an understanding of how customers will behave and what they need. From experience, Ellie, as did Paris, described how Drama was incredibly useful in the medical sector and working with vulnerable people, citing this as proof of Drama's applicability to working life. The main point many made was that the job market requires both STEM and A&H skillsets, working in tandem, with Miles, for example, stating that the idea STEM can provide largely on its own as 'very naïve...

because it's all interdependent'. Rosa, who did a BA in English and Management, said neither was better than the other for providing employable skills because 'they... balance each other', each filling the gaps the other leaves. Louise was particularly convinced that reducing A&H graduates was not 'the way of the future' because having people with the 'same way of thinking is not a good thing', range and diversity crucial for generating new ideas and challenging entrenched ways of thinking. She stated that:

I definitely think it's about bouncing off conversation [*sic*], of that disagreeing to agreeing... that builds something better, whether it's a product [or] an idea... [it] make[s] you consider different things and plan for more eventualities'.

Although valid and compelling, the students' readiness to defend A&H in these terms demonstrates the strength of the discourse-driven link between value and employability in their way of thinking. In further exemplification of student's using an economical and utilitarian lens to view A&H contributions, Arthur and Oliver both stressed the importance of British creative industries to the economy. Oliver stated:

'the British arts sector is one of the biggest in the world and it's one of our biggest money makers... British TV and film and literature is globally widely recognised as massively valuable'.

Similarly, Arthur described British cultural output as 'golden', and something that shouldn't be understated or ignored due to its significant contribution to national prestige on the world stage.

However, the entertainment industry was also used in defence of A&H in a very different way that lay outside any economic contribution it could make. Many students described the necessity of A&H by emphasising the ubiquity of entertainment and its constant consumption, especially in light of the COVID-19 pandemic. Angel stated:

'when everything was locked down, what were people doing? People were turning to TV, to radio, theatre... [and] if you want people to entertain you, you need to allow them to learn how'.

Similarly, Charlotte termed ignoring A&H's contribution to society as 'plainly stupid, because how can you ignore such a massive part of our lives?'. Even Charlie, who was otherwise very critical, highlighted the importance of A&H for stimulating cultural development. Such a focus



on the societal contributions of A&H was a prominent and illuminating aspect to emerge from the data. For many, these far outweighed any economic or job-related contribution, and formed the main, passionately-expressed pivot of their defence of A&H.

On a personal level, many attested to a feeling of enrichment and fulfilment having studied A&H. Julia, Rosa, Charlie and Sidarthur appreciated the imagination, creativity, freedom and escapism their subjects offered alongside an ability to critically and thoughtfully observe the world. Louise highlighted that her degree has ‘definitely... developed... [her] as a person’, in a similar way to Arthur and Oliver who said they felt more intelligent and able to understand the world. Taking this further, Charlotte felt by choosing to study English she was ‘keeping in check with [her] ideals rather than prioritising making money’, a decision she said she made:

because I felt like I would be unhappy and... live an unfulfilling life if I didn’t pursue my passion...’

The importance placed on being passionate about one’s subject was echoed by many of the students. Jan stated that A&H is quite singular for ‘foster[ing]... [a] kind of passion in people’, the ‘extra 20%’ commitment needed to overcome the ‘hurdles’ presented when studying A&H, adding to a feeling of investment in the subject. Joan also felt, in protesting the government’s actions, that they were forgetting ‘how passionate a lot of us are’, which she said was crucial to maintaining a sense of enjoyment and excitement that could then be transferred to keep others happily engaged in the field.

Students then related this positivity to the benefit A&H can offer society. In relation to the need for a balance between STEM and A&H, Oliver stated that ‘a healthy society is one in which there is room for everybody... for all types of interests’, and regarded History’s contribution as vital for political decision-making and a true comprehension and cognizance of society and one’s place in it, that is, why things are the way they are. In having such an understanding, he argued one was best placed to ‘work towards a better world’. Angel offered something very similar, and added that A&H allowed one to capture a sense of humanity, much like Ellie who considered ‘connecting with humans’ from all ‘different groups’, with an ability to ‘empathise’, to be a huge asset for A&H. In light of her use of Drama in grasping, processing and expressing ‘challenging topics’, she stated that the arts are in a unique position to ‘give voice to the voiceless’. This idea that one, by studying A&H, gains a deeper and more holistic understanding of our emotional selves, in our decision-making and interaction with others, was

expressed by Joan as being directly derivative of a familiarity with history, literature, and art. A statement reiterated by several other students, for Joan, studying A&H had illuminated the fact that:

‘there isn’t really that much of a difference between the human condition at all throughout the world, our environments have changed but we really haven’t’.

From this idea she concluded that the arts were ‘essential, not a luxury’ for enabling us to ‘properly help each other, or think of good ways to solve the issues we are facing’, stimulating a sense of community and belonging despite differences, and ability to relate to one another in an empathetic and generous way.

Similarly, Miles believed that ‘we wouldn’t have a world... culture, society’ without A&H, and employed an apt analogy to describe its centrality and necessity. Comparing the growth of individual and societal knowledge to a tree, Miles described how A&H stimulates the growth of our foundational and community knowledge. This knowledge acts as the ‘roots’ of the tree, which we draw upon to ‘inform all of our decisions’. Thus, Miles portrayed how, without A&H being studied and produced, the tree could not survive. On an individual level, one needs them in some form for important ‘internal work’ and emotional processing, therefore emerging with a heightened ‘community instinct’ to mitigate the likelihood for selfish actions that could damage others. This then transfers to the societal level, where the need for the roots to get ‘deeper and more secure’ is related to the need for society to properly understand itself in order to improve. In attempting to comprehend the government’s perspective, Miles believed their focus to be on the ‘fruits’ of the tree, the ‘fun new stuff’ like technological advancements, A&H’s contribution easier to ignore because it is more hidden. However, without these roots, they described how there would be no fruit, and that the neglect of A&H would have consequences for all areas of knowledge, having a detrimental impact on society at large. Pulling these threads together, Louise stated that A&H was central in allowing people to ‘thrive’, Charlotte positing:

‘I feel like it’s quite upsetting almost to push it aside, as if the need to socialise and enjoy ourselves and see beautiful things isn’t one of the core things people want in their lives’.

Such a statement implies that, for Charlotte, government priorities lie elsewhere, namely, in producing work-ready employees. She also alluded to an idea that suppression of A&H was a conscious decision designed to temper radicalism, political criticism, and a ‘question[ing] [of] the system we live in’. Arthur and Oliver also suggested this might have some truth, seeing the rhetoric as an attack on ideological progressivism and critical thought, not wanting people to ‘envision alternatives’ to the political model the government are promoting. The depth of thought the students demonstrated in articulating the importance of A&H for society beyond the economy, lends significant weight to the argument that the low value discourse has yet to have a defining impact on student’s perceptions. Although some of what was said was within the language of the discourse, many expressed an awareness that there are alternate possibilities and ways of perceiving the contributions of A&H and what purpose such degrees serve.

## Discussion

Answering the overarching question of how A&H students perceive their choice of degree subject resulted in a stimulating set of sub-questions to do with the embeddedness of the ‘student as consumer’ paradigm; the presence and strength of neoliberal discourse within the perceptions of students; and how this may or may not determine how the value of their degree choice was conceptualised. A thematic analysis alongside close attention to language choice in the data revealed that students faced fundamental conflict within their perceptions and articulations of A&H degrees, their value and their purpose, though were largely strongly in defence of A&H’s merits. Framing data analysis through the lens of Foucault and discourse, demonstrated that, in parts, the low value discourse and associated neoliberal framings of HE did hold some sway, but a more compelling revelation was a deep desire from the students to envision and express alternatives.

The prevalence of the negativity towards the arts in the students’ environments corresponds directly with the awareness students had of A&H’s reputation in school as researched by Thomson et al. (2020). As such it seems this prevalence is not unique, and that the history of hierarchisation of the subjects still constructs a discourse that informs contemporary perceptions. In highlighting the impact of schooling, the work of Ball (2017) in analysing neoliberal discourse’s authority in school becomes prescient, and shows how much influence such a discourse has over students. Thus, the derision these students experienced can be explained by the precedent already set and reinforced through discourse that A&H degrees hold less intrinsic worth than STEM degrees as explored in the literature review.

As stated within the data analysis, the choice to pursue A&H regardless already demonstrates a level of resistance to the discourse, linked with students feeling that the marketisation of HE and focus on employment outcomes was misguided and inappropriate. This lends support to the literature that defames the neoliberal construction of HE, and suggests that students are not overtly inclined to construct themselves as consumers, or use the lens of human capital theory to conceptualise their university experience. The references students made to university being crucial for self-formation mirrors the arguments put forth by Russell (1926/2010), Gallagher (2004), and Marginson (2020), that HE has much more to offer than just a pathway to a high-paying job. Knowingly or unknowingly, in expressing such ideas students were directly

challenging the way HE is constructed globally under neoliberal ideals, and exemplified that the discourse embodied by those in charge stands in contrast to that embodied by students.

However, in thinking through the low value discourse, it became obvious that the students were still operating in a world that is defined within these rules, and they showed clear cognizance of what those rules and expectations of them were. Similarly to Tholen's (2013) study, the students showed responsiveness to the demands of human capital and the labour market and were still aware that at some level, university was a form of investment in their futures (Esson & Ertl, 2016). As such, the concern from students that A&H would damage their job prospects chimes with Chan (2016)'s findings that A&H held a reputation for lacking a vocational link, and demonstrates the difficulty students had in entirely resisting the low value discourse. Indeed, as some expressed genuine dissatisfaction with labour market returns, more work on improving careers services could be required. The reference made to labour market saturation and degree inflation supports the interpretation made by Harrison (2009) that degrees have become insurance against downward mobility, and those of Tomlinson (2008), where fear of unemployment is rife among the student population. The importance placed on fees and the way students discussed supposedly safer degree options imply that the "student as rational consumer" discourse is very much present as a *dispositif*, and is influential on how the students perceive the world, but exists as an optional decision-making rationale rather than the defining one. In this sense, aspects of the 'low value' discourse had been internalised but by students in no way formed a totality.

The knowledge students had of the influence of economics over governmental decisions reflects that of the literature, Hamman (2013)'s observation, for example, that a degree is deemed of little worth if unable to secure economic gain. Therefore, the juxtaposed comparisons they drew between STEM and A&H in reference to the labour market are strong evidence of Foucault's argument that discourse can become so naturalised as to be reinforced and rearticulated by the subjects it manipulates. Even if students disagreed, they still, to a certain extent, perceived A&H within the rhetoric of 'low value'. Such comparisons also exemplify Bernstein's (1973) ideas that a strong dichotomous identity exists between the sciences and the arts. His argument that such classification exists as a form of control, and students are socialised into inhabiting a strong subject identity that enhances difference over commonality, is demonstrable in the students' descriptions, and in their emotionally-driven loyalty to A&H. Hence, a hierarchy of subjects is enabled and fortified, and the "low value"

rhetoric is given more power. Again, aspects of the ‘low value’ discourse do seem to have influenced student perceptions.

Nevertheless, in articulating a defence of A&H, the conflict students faced in confronting the discourse becomes most prevalent and reveals the limits to the discourse’s power. At points they worked within the discourse, using the rhetoric of skills, the positive contributions A&H graduates made to the job market, and the economic strength of creative industries. In doing so, students reflected the split in academic literature in regards to A&H. For example, like Josa & Aguardo (2021), they lobbied for the need of interdisciplinary knowledge within businesses, organisations, and markets and, like Comunian et al. (2013) and many official policy documents, presented the high value of creative output in the British economy as reasoning for A&H to be supported. In this way, they satisfied the discourse-driven link between intrinsic value and monetary value.

Simultaneously, however, in defending A&H, students offered a powerful alternative vision, which speaks to the potential for a discursive gap as theorised by Bernstein (2009). Using his descriptors, as the transformation of the university according to a neoliberal vision is not yet complete, leaving an indirect relationship between discursive meanings and their material base, there is a space for alternative discourses to emerge. He describes this space as ‘the site for the unthinkable... of the impossible... of the yet to be thought’ (p. 44). To some degree, the students use this space when expressing the ways in which A&H is beneficial for creating a more happy, empathetic, and cohesive society. Their ideas correspond with Russell (1926/2010), Biesta (2005), and Hamman (2013) who all argue for the beneficial influence of A&H on citizen, person and societal-formation, and Feldt & Peterson’s (2021) articulation of how a humanities-driven imagination can reveal the universal human experience and construct a way forward. Like Cramer (2016), the students saw A&H as crucial for forming a human community and solving problems for the greater good. Thus, in this section, it appears that the students have achieved what Foucault would describe as a subjectivity freed from subjectification, enabling a thought process that exists outside of the neoliberal discourse.

Furthermore, the way some expressed that they thought the defunding of A&H may have a political motivation, in quashing critique of the system, heavily relates to the theorisations of Gramsci. By controlling ideas, Gramsci believed individuals were held back from forming a ‘critical self-consciousness of their own position’ (Mardle, 1977, p. 143), and thus

counteracting the domination of the elite. He also referred to the commonality of a 'radical youth', and the use of education to quell such radicalisation (Bates, 1975, p. 361). Similarly, Biesta recognises the need for learning to achieve emancipation from hegemonic ideas, and explains how Foucault sees the transgression of the limits of discourse as the first step to unsettling the status quo. The students' ability to entertain such an idea whilst grasping the value of their degrees in equipping them with the technique of critical thought, offers a profound argument that the 'low value' discourse is unrepresentative of how students perceive their degree choices, and has not, by any means, entirely embedded itself in their vision of HE.

## Conclusion

In conducting research into understanding A&H students' perceptions of their degree subjects, my aim was to answer the following questions:

1. To what extent have the discourses of 'student as consumer' and 'low value' embedded themselves within student perceptions?
2. To what extent do neoliberal discourses shape student perceptions of the university and their place in it?
3. In what ways do students conceptualise the value of their degree subjects?
4. How dominant is the 'low value' discourse within such conceptualisations?

In doing so, I placed the 2021 policy decision to cut funding to A&H alongside the rhetoric of 'low value' courses as central to my interview questions and analysis. As such, my study touched upon numerous areas of scholarly research in relation to: the marketisation of HE; the influx of neoliberal ideals; the denigration of A&H; the economisation of degree subjects; alternative visions for HE; and student perspectives on the purpose of HE. A focal point within my research, that runs through these research areas, was the concept of the student as consumer whereby students are expected to behave as if they are rationally investing in a product, a degree, which will give them financial returns in the labour market. The other focal point that brought these ideas together was that of 'low value courses', rhetoric perpetually used by government officials and in government policy. This rhetoric implicitly equates intrinsic value with economic or monetary value and, as such, A&H are deemed of low value and use to the economy, so should be side-lined in favour of STEM. Such concepts can be described as discourses, a term developed by Foucault to describe the workings of power within societies. A discourse can be seen to affect one's perceptions, thoughts and actions, if one is framed as a consumer, for example, one begins to behave like one. Combining Foucault's work with that of Bernstein, Bourdieu and other authors, formed my conceptual framework, which allowed for the level of embeddedness of certain ideologically-driven ideas within student perceptions to be measured. Conceiving the study this way reveals the level of power a neoliberal imagining and structuring of the world has in influencing student's thoughts and actions.

My data revealed a narrative of struggle for students. From before they started university, they were confronted by negative reactions and stereotypes, once there, used to the derision and



ritual ridicule of their degree subjects. By choosing A&H regardless, they had resisted discourse-driven pressure to do the opposite, generating deep investment in and loyalty to their subjects. Chosen for enjoyment, they resented the construction of university as a business, and the branding of A&H as low value, believing a degree had far more to offer than just a high-paying job, rather enabling one to become a more well-rounded person. However, in confronting why A&H was being targeted, elements of the ‘student as consumer’ and ‘low value’ discourse came through. Many were worried about their careers, and adjusted their behaviour to increase employability. Due to degree inflation, some considered other options to be better for the particular skillset they gave, A&H lacking in this area. Comprehending the government’s decision, and their economic focus, demonstrated that, on some level, students agreed that A&H made less of an economic contribution than STEM. Moreover, in describing A&H in comparison to STEM, A&H was far less directly applicable to the labour market, a belief disseminated through the ‘low value’ discourse. When asked in what ways A&H contributed to society, however, students were quick to leap to its defence. Passionate in their responses, students defended A&H in two distinct ways, working within neoliberal economic-driven discourses, and working outside them. They argued for A&H’s transferable skillset, that jobs required such a skillset, and that the creative industries made considerable economic contributions. At the same time, they also argued, at far greater length, that A&H had far more to offer in the realm of producing better people, making better citizens, and thus creating a better society. Providing empathy, generosity, and thoughtfulness, the emotional wellbeing A&H provided for all people was considered its biggest asset, without which individuals would be far less contented and society would be far more divided. Some even thought the defunding of A&H to be a conscious decision to quell radical political critique in the minds of the youth. Altogether, it seemed that the student as consumer and low value discourses had not, by any means, fully embedded themselves within student perceptions. Rather, given the realms of their reality, students were able to confidently and imaginatively envision alternative discourses that challenged neoliberal ideals.

As it stands, A&H has been under increasing attack for decades. Recent policy decisions and rhetoric have only heightened pressure universities already faced to cut back on A&H and mould themselves to the demands of market forces and neoliberal logics. In this study students have both demonstrated that this process is largely undesired and resented by the student population, and that the value of a degree and university lies far beyond any utility-limited framework. Their avid defence of A&H reveals what alternative lenses one could view the

contributions of A&H and university through, and confirms A&H's centrality and necessity to the development of a healthy society. As such, investigating and articulating these ideas in order to build alternative discourses, has never been more pressing.

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