



Is your university degree barely worth the paper it's written on? Discuss

We're constantly told university education is a good thing. But with tuition fees so high, it's time its true value was measured



Undergraduate students on the St Andrews University 'pier walk'. 'The latest prediction is that an extra 300,000 university places will be needed by 2030.' Photograph: Jane Barlow/PA

In the past few decades we've seen a huge growth in undergraduate numbers. Back in 1945, a tiny 2% of the population went to university; today, just over 43% of young people in England go; the latest prediction is that an extra 300,000 places will be needed by 2030.

We're frequently told that graduates earn more on average than non-graduates; that universities boost local economies; and, of course, that a degree stretches the mind and nurtures critical thinking.

Those who interrogate this logic are easily dismissed as philistines, or reactionaries who don't care that expansion has occurred alongside record numbers of disadvantaged young people going to university.

But the thinking around why we've expanded undergraduate education so significantly is rather woolly. *Is more always better?* What are we hoping to achieve by sending ever greater numbers to university, apart from widening access (which could instead be achieved through the use of quotas for young people from poorer backgrounds for university admissions)?

The economics professor Bryan Caplan raises an important question in a controversial new book, *The Case Against Education*. How much of the benefits of a degree comes from the skills you acquire in studying for it? And how much from the piece of paper at the end – what your degree certificate signals to employers about the skills and attributes you might have had long before you filled in a university application form?

Universities UK claims that the institutions add over £60bn worth of skills with each cohort of graduates. But this analysis simply wishes away Caplan's question by assuming all the higher earning that graduates get is down to the skills they pick up doing their degree.

The truth is that a fair bit of the earnings boost provided by a degree – we don't know how much – is likely to come from the fact that a graduate has, in the eyes of employers, jumped through a hoop in a world where growing numbers of their peers are doing likewise. If everyone else going for that bar job has a degree, you'd better have one too. It's becoming more common to have a degree in jobs for which you wouldn't have needed one 30 years ago. South Korea provides a cautionary tale: 70% of the country's school-leavers go to university, but recent graduates are facing relatively high rates of unemployment, and it is not unheard of to find graduates working as caretakers.

Boosting earning potential is not the only reason we send young people to university. But to go beyond that, we need to be able to better answer the age-old question of what undergraduate education is for. A distinction is often drawn between those who see its primary purpose as the expansion of the mind that comes from learning for learning's sake – and those who see it as providing important vocational training for specific jobs. Both traditions have a longstanding history in our system.

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The philosopher **Martha Nussbaum** argues powerfully that in an increasingly uncertain world, it has never been more important for universities to “**educate the imagination**” rather than impart specific skills. She's not alone: the technology giant *Apple* has poached renowned thinkers such as **Joshua Cohen** to be part of the faculty at its employee “*university*”; Silicon Valley firms are recruiting not just computer whizzes but **liberal arts grads**.

With the absorption of polytechnics back in the 1990s, universities have played a growing role in vocational training – and not just for professions like engineering or nursing. Universities are increasingly focusing on graduate “*employability*”; one new university that promises to take its students on a “**personal development journey**” is even guaranteeing them all a **one-year work placement** at companies such as *Microsoft* as part of a three-year degree.

So perhaps we don't have to zero in specifically on what we want universities to achieve with young people. The former higher education minister David Willetts is very relaxed about the notion that different courses do different things: studying history might be great preparation for some non-history related jobs; but he's also a big fan of universities that have a great reputation for specific skills, like construction at Southbank or media production at Bournemouth.

But this still doesn't answer the *Caplan challenge*.

When it comes to hospitals and schools, we have impartial – albeit imperfect – data about how good they are at fulfilling their missions. Because universities award their own degrees, and firsts from different universities cannot be regarded as comparable, this is a difficult task for undergraduate education. This is a problem, particularly given we don't really know whether university is the best place to pick up “*on the job*” skills, or whether we are trying to emulate in our universities – at much greater cost to taxpayers and students – what employers would have once provided.

Trying to generate good and comparable data about the skills young people develop as a result of studying for a degree is not without risks of reductionism. But if universities think their courses expand creativity, nurture critical thinking and develop important workplace skills, surely they should be up for putting that to the test?

This is critical in a world where it is entirely rational for individuals to opt to go to university so they can compete on a level playing field – even if they suspect the skills they develop might not in themselves be worth the price-tag or time.

It might be difficult to develop the measures we need to test the hunch behind the established education consensus that more is better. But we owe it to young people to at least try.

- Sonia Sodha is chief leader writer of the Observer. She is presenting Analysis: What Are Universities For? on BBC Radio 4, Sunday 18 March, 9.30pm
- The caption to the picture on this article was amended on 16 March 2018 because the image shows a variety of undergraduate students performing the “pier walk”, not new students as an earlier version said.

Further reading :

- [How to fix our universities – cap the number of students](#) - Sonia Sodha