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## **Value education and money**

Google 'the value of a university degree?' and you will be presented with information about boosting your future earnings and just as quickly find discussions of 'low value' degrees. The critical input of politicians and media commentators has created an environment where the purpose of education is often debased. Questions about the value of degrees seem to occur most often about arts-based degrees and those leading to careers in arts and heritage.

One of the most common measures of degree quality are employment statistics and salaries 15 months after graduation (HESA 2022). The term 'worthless' has been used when salaries don't exceed 'national averages' and this has called into question the existence of some degree schemes. University managers claim that your degree contributes to you, your community, and the economy but they measure success by salary. Do you agree that the value of an education is it only to be measured in salary? When heritage salaries are notoriously low (ICON 2022, MA 2022) are all degrees and careers in the sector meaningless? We hope Icon News readers agree that this is not true. The Museums Association campaign "Museums Change Lives" provides numerous case studies evidencing the benefits of the heritage sector to society. We also believe that better salaries and working conditions are something we should fight for. Sadly, the marketisation of education has also played a part in depressing salaries and conditions for staff in higher education.

## **Marketization of education**

The UK education system has been 'marketized' which means that market mechanisms decide how resources will be allocated. Education is a commodity and education establishments compete under market forces to provide services.

The marketization of education impacts on student expectations, encouraging a culture that paying fees means you have bought an outcome. The student-as-consumer expects to receive an experience rather than to participate in an educational process, they expect good value measured in money rather than a good education measured in stimulation, knowledge, and growth. Receiving a bad mark becomes a failure in the delivered service rather than an opportunity to learn and grow. When we remove the ability to grow through experience, we disempower conservation students and future conservators from the ability to develop their own learning skills.

## **What can a student reasonably expect?**

Conservation is complex, requiring students to grasp theoretical concepts across academia, develop practical skills and enact them within an ethical framework that serves society. Conservation students are expected to learn to do this in only a few short years and on graduation take up a position with responsibility for the care of irreplaceable cultural heritage. Doesn't this suggest that the degree should be challenging? We reject education as the passive consumption of information with the work being done by those who deliver it. We think educators should facilitate learning experiences and shape the context in which the students work. It is our job to provide appropriate challenges not to make things easy.

Another question to discuss is: should a degree fully prepare you for *any* conservation job? Workplace apprenticeships certainly do this well, where the education is led and shaped by employers, and this supports learners to slot perfectly into an intended job role. Such a perfect jigsaw piece is likely to be less adaptable though to a range of different job roles. For this the academic approach may be more suitable.

The academic approach teaches more generic skills; decision making, critical thinking, the ability to read and reflect, a commitment to ethical practice and a framework and aptitude for personal

development. Students leaving a degree for private practice may wish they had learnt bookkeeping, those working in the field may wish to have had an additional language, other graduates may focus on analysis, teaching, or communication. No academic degree can ever offer an instructional approach for every eventuality and adding one thing always means taking another thing away. Because marketisation creates an environment where education is a passive consumer experience it strips students of their agency to plan their careers, to follow their hearts and to be active leaders in their own development.

### **What value is there in a conservation degree for a non-conservator?**

By making degrees transactional: “you pay us fees we transition you to a well-paid job”, the educational process itself is lost. Why shouldn't a conservation graduate work as a dance teacher, or in computing and finance? Education should provide all learners with personal and professional benefits regardless of career path. When students learn to be thoughtful and accountable decision makers; to marshal resources; to collect and appraise evidence and apply it to context then they can conserve, or they can find other roles. There are many roles that need critical thinkers who can develop and evidence an independent perspective; who can listen to and acknowledge the input and expertise of others; and can promote that in an ethical way. The value of those life skills cannot simply be measured by salary. None of this precludes campaigning for better salaries, it is simply making the distinction, demand education for learning and salaries commensurate for skills and knowledge.

### **Marketisation and impact on staff and students**

By commercialising education, capitalist economics shape how education is run. Universities are investing in new buildings to promote their status, the salaries of the highest earners are eye-watering, but profit has to be made so costs are reduced elsewhere. In recent years in the UK this has meant that staff costs, in the form of salaries and pensions, have been cut. Increasing numbers of students on courses without increasing support has seen workloads rising, with around 7 in 10 respondents to a recent UCU survey saying that workload pace and intensity had increased significantly and over a third of staff responding by saying that their workloads were unmanageable most of the time (UCU, 2022).

This in turn impacts on students. Excessive workloads reduce student contact time available, time to return coursework and provide feedback, and the interaction that might be expected in practical classes and seminars. Staff workload is an education issue – well motivated staff with time to teach are essential to a decent higher education system.

Sadly, the advocates of Marketisation are right about one thing, what attracts students. Open days are marketplaces where students tour the statement buildings hear from any superstar staff and get fed a rich offer of lifestyle and leisure. They are sold an experience. Students only meet the teaching staff with no money to heat their homes, the ones whose mental health is in crisis through chasing myriad targets or whose work and life has absolutely no balance once their fees have been paid.

### **Is there a better way?**

We can take a stand for the value of education and for our value as professionals. We can defend the idea that a (conservation) degree should be challenging and support our next generation through that. Encourage the language that students are active in their learning, that they make choices and control their priorities and that we, their teachers, want nothing more than to support them to succeed.

### **Biogs**

Professor Jane Henderson teaches collections care and conservation in Cardiff University and has worked in museums for decades. Through her career, her focus has moved from preventive conservation to communication and decision making to issues of social justice within collection care.

Phil Parkes teaches conservation in Cardiff University, bringing 30 years of practical conservation experience into the laboratory modules. He currently enjoys making copies of archaeological and historical maille items and teaching these skills through workshops. He is notoriously grumpy and yet is the most loved of all teachers.

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