

It's wrong to call for culling university courses that don't result in higher earnings

The [Institute for Fiscal Studies \(IFS\)](#) undertook research to collate “accurate and timely estimates of the relative value of different degree courses... to ensure degrees represent value for money for both students and the government”. Subsequent [reports](#) on the findings claimed that 130,000 men enrol on university courses that will lead them to earn less in their early careers than non-graduates – although it's not clear from the IFS report how the comparison was arrived at. What is within the IFS report, however, is a clarification from its authors that it relates only to “the returns between different university course choices... which means [their] estimates are all relative to the average graduate and are not compared to the outside option of not attending university”.

I had wanted to check how the media claim was arrived at to determine what other influences there might be on these male graduates' earnings. For instance, if the earning potential of some graduates is lower than that of non-graduates, is this a new trend? If so, could this be as a result of non-graduate earning potential having improved? Or, might the data pinpoint an upward trend in men taking subjects because of a passion for them, whereas traditionally men might have opted more often for subjects that lead to higher earnings?

Unfortunately, as stated, the research doesn't delve into the earnings of non-graduates, so it's not possible to compare graduate and non-graduate earnings in this level of detail. The authors do note that this will be a topic for future research, which I'm sure will be warmly welcomed. If it did prove that non-graduates are thriving, this would surely be a cause for celebration. Government, employers and educators have been promoting alternative post-18 pathways to pupils for some years now, meanwhile access to university has substantially widened, with many more young people attending university and undertaking a broader range of courses.

What's more, the report only relates to graduates' earnings potential by the age of 29 – not throughout their lives. Is there any reason we should be alarmed if some graduates earn less by 29 than their peers who joined the workforce as school leavers and, therefore, had a three year head start? Would we be less alarmed to discover the findings relate not to medicine or engineering graduates, but only to men “studying one of seven university subjects – creative arts, English, philosophy, agriculture, communications, psychology and languages”?

I don't think there's any reason that an English graduate necessarily deserves to earn more than a school leaver who joined a management consultancy's apprenticeship programme, for example. Nor do I think a creative arts or languages graduate should necessarily be paid higher than an electrician, simply because they attended university – electricians are highly trained and the whole country relies on them working to agreed standards. And I don't see why a philosophy graduate has any particular right to earn more than an estate agent or recruiter who chose to join the workforce at 18 instead of

spending three years reading, thinking and debating at university. There is no logical reason why we should assume that all graduates deserve to be paid higher than all non-graduates – none at all.

But then, I also don't think the value of going to university should be assessed by earning potential, or that careers should be chosen based on salary alone. Which is why I can't abide the comments made by Sam Gyimah who was, until the end of November, Minister of State for Universities and Science. He called on the Office for Students (OfS) to "expose the university courses that do not deliver value... and to force the university to actually delist that course, or actually improve the course". He added that he believes "transparency is the best disinfectant here" and that universities need to deliver courses that are employer-focused and recognised by the industry.

Once again I find myself wondering why the 'value' of education is so often seen as a purely functional tool for economic growth. Yes, there is a place for the IFS report's findings, for pupils making decisions about whether to go to university at all, and which university and course to apply for if they do go. They should absolutely be given as much information as possible about the potential outcomes of each course, especially with university fees at their highest, and no maintenance grants to support students with the cost of living. But the choices students make about whether to go to university won't only impact their earning potential, but also their monthly take-home pay; many will find themselves repaying student loans for decades beyond entering the workforce.

Pupils also need to think about the value of university in terms of how they want to spend their time – both at university, and in their careers beyond. For many, time is a much more valuable commodity than income or wealth. Looking back on my own and my peers' time at university, those years were definitely some of the most free of my life. I certainly 'wasted' some of the time I had playing 'too much sport' (if such a thing is possible), but I also revelled in having the freedom to delve into reading at length about political philosophy, which was my passion. Few of us in adulthood have as much time as we would have had at university, to develop our thinking, knowledge, and attitudes. This element of university experience should not be undervalued – for many people, this time in their lives would actually be, or have been, invaluable.

I'm pleased to say that for many young people I meet, the decision about whether to go to university and what course to embark on focuses on how they value their time – both in terms of whether to go to university but also into their careers – than on the salaries they might earn. They recognise that education itself is valuable, as are careers that allow them to live the sort of day to day lives they seek, that will allow them to do what they are good at, and that will allow them to do what they will enjoy.

So instead of calling to cull courses that don't boost incomes by the age of 29, we should reflect on the many other ways that these courses might add value to young people's lives, while also recognising and championing the alternative pathways that equally add value. And instead of interpreting reports like this IFS study by pitching one group of young people against another, we should be doing what we can to ensure that all young people are able to pursue the pathway that will

be most valuable to them. Those who want to go to university must be helped and encouraged to do so; those who don't must be equally supported as they carve out a different path for their lives.

The reward comes not only to young people when they are given the freedom to direct their lives in whichever way suits their individual passions and circumstances best, but when all members of our society are given a platform to thrive in a way that uses their unique gifts and talents. This in turn benefits society much more richly than when everyone is pressured into pursuing known pathways, or higher salaries, just for the sake of it – instead of being encouraged to care for and support others, to create and invent, to innovate and to lead, according to what comes from within them.