

## The affluent can have their souls enriched at university, so why not the poor as well? By Kenan Malik, *The Observer*, June 2, 2024

### The latest Tory crusade over 'rip-off' degrees continues to stereotype students based on class.

‘We must crack down on low-value university degrees.’ claimed Prime Minister Rishi Sunak last week. Around one in five students “would have been financially better off” not going to college and “one in three graduates are in non-graduate jobs,” he told reporters. He promised to scrap “rip-off degrees”, replacing them with 100,000 apprenticeships.

What, though, is a “low-value” degree? For many policymakers the worth of a degree is measured primarily by metrics such as the proportion of students who fail to complete their course and the number who land high-skilled, well-paid jobs. Humanities courses or media studies are often seen as being of low value because their economic reward is small as compared with Stem (science, technology, engineering and mathematics) courses.

Ironically, though, the highest dropout rates at universities are in computer sciences, business and administrative studies, and engineering and technology. When it comes to apprenticeships, again the data conflicts with the narrative. Almost half of all apprenticeship starts are now for over-25s. Just 54% of apprentices successfully completed their training and assessment in 2022/23, nearly half dropping out because of the poor quality of their training. As a report from the thinktank EDSK observed: “If A-level or university students were dropping out in such large numbers or reporting similar complaints, it would be a national scandal”.

Apprenticeships should receive proper government attention. Instead, politicians choose to whip up a moral panic about poor-quality university courses while largely ignoring the lack of quality in many apprenticeships.

Also often ignored is the impact of class on student experiences and outcomes. A study last year by London South Bank University’s Antony Moss showed that students who had been eligible for free school meals (FSM), a proxy for poverty, are less likely to complete their degree, achieve a good grade or get into a graduate-level job or further study. Improving the quality of courses barely challenged such inequality.

The background to all this is the colonisation of policymaking by a more instrumental view of education as valuable primarily because of its economic benefits, whether personal or national. It is a perspective that has turned universities into businesses, students into consumers and knowledge into a commodity. The notion of learning as being a good in itself, as a means of elevating the quality of our lives, is now derided as hopelessly naive, or at least as something that should be the preserve of elite students.

The instrumental view of education is often presented as a means of advancing working-class students by training them for the job market. In reality, what it does is tell them to study whatever best fits them for their station in life. As *the Observer*’s Martha Gill observed last year, many politicians and commentators value university education as a means “to elevate human lives and nourish the soul, regardless of any job market benefit” – but only for a certain class of people. “The sorts of students to whom we tend to apply a financial – rather than spiritual – calculation when it comes to higher education,” she wrote, “tend to be those from poorer backgrounds.”

For the affluent, education is about enriching the soul. For working-class students, it is viewed primarily as a route to the job market. They are seen as the kind of people who benefit from more “vocational” learning. As education analyst Jim Dickinson, associate editor of the higher education platform WONKHE, observes: “When we say “low-value” courses, isn’t there a danger that we really mean ‘low-value students’?”