

Economic Precarity, Modern Liberal Arts and Creating a Resilient Graduate

Adam J Smith, University of Winchester

BA Modern Liberal Arts

4,733 words

INTRODUCTION

This paper will outline the ways in which precarity and absurdity have come to shape the existence of humanities students emerging from England's system of higher education today (especially in the economic sphere) and how universities have failed to face up to the reality of post-crash economics for many of their graduates. The arguments made here will be focused on the English universities and in particular the graduates of non-STEM (science, technology, engineering and mathematics) subjects. It will be my argument that a broad-based, philosophical liberal arts education which is rooted in ancient first principles but imbued with the fluidity to adapt to post-foundational and precarious existences can reinvigorate English higher education and create graduates who are not only prepared for economic precarity but also equipped with a deep and abiding resilience for life.

The Rise of Economic Precarity

Precarity in the economic sphere is something which ebbs and flows from generation-to-generation and from decade-to-decade. The post-war period was characterised by secure jobs in nationalised industries with strong unions for many in the working classes and by final salary pensions and lifelong careers for the middle classes. The spectre of precarity has once again arisen in the lives of the many and not the few, especially in the millennial generation which is currently subject to the marketised higher education sector.

Work has become absurd and the graduate entering into this world of work finds themselves negotiating economic and social precarity and technological revolution in a world which is increasingly more unstable and less knowable. In networked late-capitalism the non-STEM graduate is at the mercy of this absurdity in finding and maintaining paid employment. As an illustration of this, I will use Ivor Southwood's book *Non-Stop Inertia*; a first-hand account of life as a literature graduate unable to secure traditional employment who finds himself floating between unemployment and temporary employment. It is a situation which I recognise from my own life and from the lives of many friends and contemporaries:

“Where I work, doing what and for whom, for how long and how much; all these co-ordinates are arbitrary to the point of absurdity. In this non-place and this non-job, I feel detached from any meaningful social identity” (Southwood, 2011, p.70)

The once familiar landscape of graduate employment, jobs-for-life, final salary pensions and work-based identities is no longer one which the humanities graduate finds him or herself in. Instead the landscape of employment now resembles a surrealist painting. It is not the obvious disturbia of melting clocks portrayed by Dali but a more menacing and subtle surrealism like that of the English painter Paul Nash. His scenes, at first glance, seem pastoral and familiar; a living room, a wheat field, an orchard. It is only after the viewer begins to inhabit the scene that they realise the presence of unnatural,

unfamiliar forms and unreal structures. The graduate jobseeker is lulled into a sense of security believing that they are going to be deposited into the orderly and understandable world of work which faced their parents and tutors, but all too quickly the scene becomes absurd and surreal when faced with the reality of work in late capitalism. How has university failed them so badly and what can prepare them for this?

Employability Absurdity

Given this environment of absurdity how have HE institutions adapted? From the perspective of an undergraduate student it seems as though the *employability status quo*, fostered by consecutive neoliberal governments, is still the reigning intellectual force in universities. This is not to say that there are not interesting conversations being fostered on an individual academic or departmental basis but these have been slow to filter through to the student experience, let alone to the institutional level. An outmoded approach is bolstered by graduate employment surveys which do more than attempt to build an objective picture of graduate employment, they contribute to rankings and statistics which many universities feel a need to focus on.

The basic quantitative data collected on a macro level about graduate employment completely fails to capture the eroding effect of precarity on graduate life. Again, I am able to speak from some personal experience having helped to collect data for these surveys in recent years. The surveys capture a snapshot of life on the day when the surveyor calls. It does not at the same time collect a richer, more qualitative view of the

economic whole as portrayed by Southwood and others. Prospects' 2015 publication *What Do Graduates Do?* claims that 59.8% of history graduates are in employment after six monthsⁱ. The actual lived experience of students varies vastly within this statistic. Unpaid internships, voluntary work, part-time and temporary work all show up as 'employed'. Although the surveys record more detailed information such as the proliferation of zero hours contracts, self-employed work and internshipsⁱⁱ there is no incentive for universities to reveal the economic reality for graduates when they can use the blanket term 'employed'. A student who, on the day they are contacted, is on a week-long temporary contract or working on a freelance project for just a few hours, is considered to be gainfully and happily employed. Universities have no incentive to unilaterally expose the shaky foundations on which their marketing and strategic direction is based but it must be challenged.

Of particular relevance to graduates has been the rise of an 'internship economy' as identified by Heather Steffen in her paper on the subject, *Student Internships and the Privilege to Work*. Where once job security and an honest wage were seen as the right of the university graduate they have become privileges which are only open to those who can afford to work for little or no pay, for a number of years before being admitted into the 'creative classes'. Internships "model and normalize the new paradigm of work: short-term, on-demand, lacking tangible benefits, and emphasizing self-disciplined, self-directed initiative over obedience" (Steffen, 2010, p. 14).

Whilst the external economic world has become less explicitly rational and more absurd the neoliberal exercise in educational marketisation has rumbled on. Students find themselves caught between outlaying £50,000 on a loose collection of ‘transferrable skills’ while being characterised as narcissistic consumers by those fortunate enough to have received their higher education for nothing (Nixon et al, 2016). The concept of *transferrable skills* is a particularly insipid one which has come to the fore in measuring the value of higher education. The transferrable skill reduces education (and the graduate) to a great, grey utilitarian space in which the knowledge, joy, life and philosophy of learning has been extracted and discarded. Those traits are irrelevant to the employer. Instead the student need only arrive at the job interview (if they can get one) with a roster of hollowed-out skills.

The student can type, they can analyse, they can work to deadlines and write in full sentences. These skills, however, all stand to become vastly less impressive as technology takes over more and more of the mechanical, repetitive and administrative work as explored by Srnicek & Williams in their work *Inventing the Future*. What will be left is the work of vocation, creativity and care which require a wholly different set of values from higher education. Fortunately, this is a set of values which a philosophical liberal arts education, by its very nature, is able to focus on. Transferrable skills represent an output of higher education which is not only vapid in its intellectual content but also, and really rather handily, amoral. The skills in question do not rely on the moral character or judgement of a student to identify good and act appropriately, they merely underline the graduate's utility and ability to function in any workplace.

The moral dimension of higher education was once seen as being inherent in the very act of learning, especially the act of pursuing a liberal education.

For decades, particularly since the introduction of tuition fees, universities have made the argument that a degree is an investment which students make in becoming more employable and allowing them to access a higher waged area of the employment market. This is simply no longer the case for a huge swathe of students and yet they still find themselves loaded with £50,000 of debt at the end of a three-year undergraduate course in England or Wales. A crisis is brewing in the mis-match between expectations, rhetoric and cost and the reality of life in the graduate precariat. In 2014 one-third of students said they did not believe they were getting 'value for money' from their degreeⁱⁱⁱ. In this paper, I am not debating the merits of a marketised higher education which creates these questions of value, I am discussing the reality in which hundreds of thousands of young people find themselves existing for the foreseeable future.

Thus, the question of value is one which needs to be reassessed if this crisis is to be addressed. My proposal in this paper is to relocate the value of education away from an employment/investment equation and instead look to re-root it in humanity and resilience. I will outline the ways in which this resilience can be fostered and the ways in which a philosophical, modern liberal arts education offers a different and radical

answer to the question of value in higher education, one which exists in the current and future reality of economic and cultural precarity.

Certainty / Uncertainty in the Liberal Arts

Where certainty is in short supply in the economic sphere then higher education can no longer continue to act as though such certainty still exists. A philosophical liberal arts education is best placed to work within the uncertainty for a number of reasons. It is a human-focused education which, through broad-based and pluralistic subject matter and philosophical enquiry into the questions of human existence, can begin to nurture students with the aim of fostering a resilient and intellectually rounded graduate. A post-foundational liberal arts education which embraces difficulty, complexity and uncertainty does not patronise students or give them false belief in the stability of the world. It is able to be fluid and adapt to the conversations which derive from the teaching and learning experience and in doing so it moves with the currents of cultural and economic instability rather than remaining fixed and stagnant. This creates a modern graduate with an understanding of the difficulty inherent in twenty-first century life.

Writing in *Searching for Utopia* Hanna Gray outlines the moral dimension which liberal arts education has always had in creating 'statesmen', something which has been remade for the strategic plans and mission statements of today's universities as 'thought leaders' and 'global citizens'. In Renaissance Italy a liberal arts education was

seen as a non-vocational choice, not because it lacked usefulness but because it was non-specific, it didn't tend toward a particular outcome because of its broad nature.

"Knowledge should have to do with human life and how it should be lived, not with spinning out abstractions remote from the concerns of life in the world" (Gray, 2012, p. 36).

Robert M. Hutchins was a great proponent of the liberal arts as the creator of a moral man. In his introduction to the Britannica Great Books Series he writes at length on how a 'liberally educated man' sustains the democratic tradition of the West. The liberally educated man "knows what is meant by soul, state, God, beauty, and by the other terms that are basic to the discussion of fundamental issues" (Hutchins, 1988, p. 4). In the twenty first century the liberally educated man is a romantic ideal with a certain Mad Men tinge to it when seen through the post-everything lenses of the modern undergraduate. A modern liberal arts education does not have the luxury of relying on a Western tradition founded in secure moral values of tolerance, rationality and liberty.

Where Hutchins still has relevance is when he moves away from the moral argument from the liberal arts and toward an argument for its use as a way of understanding modernity: "all over the world men are on the move, expressing their determination to share in the technology in which the West has excelled. This movement is the most spectacular in history, and everybody is agreed upon one thing about it: we do not know how to deal with it" (Hutchins, 1988, p. 6). The movement hasn't ceased and, in fact, it has increased in its pace and scope with the aid of globalisation and the questions it

raises are no longer neatly confined to subject spaces. A philosophical liberal arts education provides a space in which students can explore such questions, questions about the future of humanity, our relationship to the past, the self and others and how we can begin to make sense of the post-modern world. Answers which are come upon with a degree of intellectual independence will provide graduates with some degree of philosophical grounding in the great wash of change.

Liberal Arts in Europe, 2017

The argument I am making in this paper is that a large part of the value of liberal education, moral or otherwise, is actually in the work of spinning out abstractions. If there is one thing which 500 years of human thought has shown it is that what may seem 'remote from the concerns of life in the world' today can become the fulcrum on which humanity rests in the near future. Technology is moving faster now than ever before and something like quantum teleportation which yesterday was an abstract thought experiment brought to life in episodes of *Star Trek*, today is a practical scientific matter and tomorrow an ethical and philosophical one^{iv}. Automation, robotics and developments in quantum physics are all existential threats to not only economic employment but also the human experience.

There has been a resurgence in interest in the liberal arts across Europe in the past decade or so. At the recent (and inaugural) Liberal Education Student Conference, which took place in Germany in the Spring of 2016, one of the major themes which emerged

was around defining liberal arts and whether a pan-European definition existed, or was even possible. The liberal arts programmes which were represented at the conference mostly stemmed from the implementation of a liberal mode of study whereby students were able to pick and choose courses from across a wide range of subjects. Programmes then had varying levels of core curricula which sought to provide a philosophical centring to the disparate subjects of study.

This incarnation of liberal arts education is broadly borrowed from the American sphere of higher education and carries many of the hallmarks of that educational culture. There is a focus on gaining employable skills through diversity of knowledge and in creating statesmen and civic leaders equipped with an arsenal of useable knowledge. In *Orators and Philosophers*, Bruce Kimball writes of an oratorical, civic education in the ancient world of which Cicero was a major exponent and which formed the basis for this American education. “The fundamental purpose is manifest to produce the active citizen who is thoroughly virtuous and universally competent, that is, the perfect orator capable of addressing any topic and assuming any position of leadership in the state” (Kimball, 1986, p.37).

This image of liberal arts education has also continued to thrive in the elite educational establishments of England including Oxford, Cambridge and public schools like Eton and Winchester. From the height of its educational prevalence in the 18th and 19th centuries through to the present a liberal arts education has nearly always been an

education for elites, one preoccupied with classical languages and an intellectual training in preparation for rule rather than the acquisition of specific knowledge.

A Radical, Modern Liberal Arts

It is not my belief that either of these methods of education provide the radical re-alignment which is required in the face of economic precarity and the increasing diversity of the student body. Instead there are a number of places in which I wish to find truly new and radical forms of liberal arts education which are able to produce graduates with a philosophical, personal resilience rooted in the ancient traditions but with an awareness of the difficulty, complexity and paradox which now takes the place of certainty in philosophical education. I will identify three main shaping forces for this discussion. Firstly, in Søren Kierkegaard's early journals and his pursuit of a personal truth. Secondly, in the *Liquid Education* posited by Marvin Oxenham in response to Zygmunt Bauman's theory of Liquid Modernity. Thirdly, in Nigel Tubbs' retrieval of a *Modern Liberal Arts* from ancient traditions.

I have chosen to include Søren Kierkegaard's early journals in this discussion because they represent a philosophical questioning of the purpose and value of education which closely mirrors my own feelings as an undergraduate student toward higher education and which were instrumental in me choosing a philosophical liberal arts degree. In his journals of 1835 (at the age of 22) he writes; "the thing is to understand myself, to see what God really wishes me to do; the thing is to find a truth which is true for me, to find

the idea for which I can live and die” (Kierkegaard, 2015, p.44). Although ostensibly Kierkegaard existed in a world of firm religious and philosophical orthodoxy, he here gives voice to the post-modern struggle for a personal truth. Beginning here is a search for meaning which would come to characterise his life’s work. Now, however, in a post-modern world of fractured perspectives and empty orthodoxy this search ought to support or ground education for all and not just for the philosopher.

Kierkegaard

Kierkegaard shuns the objectivity of an education where the sole aim is the accumulation of factual knowledge; “I should not, in consequence, base the development of my thought upon – well, upon something that is called objective – something that is any case not my own, but something which grows together with the deepest roots of my life” (Kierkegaard, 2015, p.45). This is an education as far away from transferrable skills as could be imagined. An education which focuses on humanity, growth and self-knowledge with the effect of creating a whole graduate rather than a graduate equipped in specific ways for specific challenges. “One must know oneself before knowing anything else. It is only after a man has thus understood himself inwardly, and has thus seen his way, that life acquires peace and significance” (Kierkegaard, 2015, p.45).

Kierkegaard here invokes the writing on the wall of the Delphic oracle; γνῶθι σεαυτὸν - know thyself. In the desire for self-knowledge and the act of trying to achieve this, is a building up of the person which creates an inner philosophical resistance in the post-stability student on which they can draw all their life. Kierkegaard here represents the

questions which students from across the economic and educational spectrum might formulate in response to the philosophical precarity in the world.

The next challenge for a liberal arts education in the twenty first century is to not only prove its worth in a marketised education system, which I believe it does as an alternative, holistic education opposed to the skills-based education currently offered, but to exist in the post-foundational, post-modern educational and philosophical environment. Using Zygmunt Bauman's theory of liquid modernity and, specifically, Marvin Oxenham's use of that in his book *Higher Education in Liquid Modernity*, I will explore the way in which higher education can embrace, rather than shrink from, the challenges of a post-foundational world. Whilst I don't advocate fully the manifesto that Oxenham advances, I believe he presents a radically different view of higher education to the current neoliberal version.

Bauman

Oxenham describes an education which lies at the extreme end of the post-modern spectrum. "In a context of continual becoming, in which there is no fixed ontological identity for human beings or for anything else, a new kind of education is being called for" (Oxenham, 2013, p.39). If it seems too extreme in parts (and it does to me) it helps to view it in the context of the accelerated economic and technological change which lies ahead of us. Even if the world we recognise now retains some fixed identities and the sheen of liberal progress, this does not look always to be the case. Oxenham posits a

situation in which knowledge and understanding become continually obsolete.

Durability and transience fall by the wayside as knowledge becomes non-transferrable and universities are at risk of becoming 'toxic waste dumps' in a society characterised by Bauman as "a civilization of waste disposal" (Oxenham, 2013, p.41).

One of the most interesting outcomes from the great liquidising of education as suggested by Oxenham is in a renewed conversation with the tradition of character education. Although I have hinted at it I have not explicitly addressed the belief that a liberal arts education rooted in humanity (and the humanities) aims at creating a *good man*. It is undoubtedly a tradition which can be seen in the Great Books education advocated by Robert M Hutchins but on the whole it is one that has been subsumed by benchmarks of wealth, usefulness and well-being. Oxenham goes as far as to say that "if higher education is on a road of constant change due to globalization and information changes, character education has the potential to represent a common denominator for the good of all" (Oxenham, 2013, p.195). This statement seems incongruous with the radical nature of Bauman's theory and with the other theses in Oxenham's book but it is emblematic of a post-modern education which looks to the past, retrieves and retains what works and discards what doesn't.

It is with some irony that I find myself unable to do the same with Oxenham's own pedagogy. At the end of his book he presents a manifesto for higher education in liquid modernity which does what post-modern theories so often do, which is to replace the old grand narrative with one of their own. In his conclusion he writes: "higher education

in the world must remain modest. Whereas the Greeks believed that education represented the entire purpose of human effort [...], higher education in liquid modernity conceives of a world that, once deconstructed, can do altogether without systematic and formal higher education as we know it today” (Oxenham, 2013, p.186). This stands in stark contrast to the educational writing of Nigel Tubbs who seeks a retrieval and revival in the philosophical liberal arts which stands in some contrast to Oxenham’s *modest* liquid education.

Tubbs

Tubbs talks of a *modern metaphysics* as a foundation for a modern liberal arts in which the first principles which ground a philosophical liberal arts education are “both true and groundless” (Tubbs, 2013, p.490), a paradox befitting of the post-modern era. Rather than seeing the challenges of higher education in the post-foundational era as a reason to dismantle philosophical education, they should be viewed as a new landscape in which to exercise the radical act of teaching and learning. This is an emancipatory space in which paradoxes such as this are free to be explored in their complexity and not shut down for a lack of solid answers. A modern liberal arts education embraces the complexity with which philosophical topics must now be broached and does not seek to bring back a historical simplicity which no longer exists. It is an exploration of the philosophical (and by extension political, cultural and economic) climate in which the student must exist away from the university campus and it has the power to create students who are resilient and thoughtful in that environment.

Rather than running from the difficulty of life in late networked capitalism and patronising a student by artificially retaining a secure and familiar space from which they will be ejected after three years, a modern liberal arts education can exhibit some integrity. Tubbs writes of the course which he has created at Winchester; “learning of the instability of the concept of humanity, and of the lack of ground for defining a human being, may well be the nearest we come to a human education that is genuinely in and of itself” (Tubbs, 2013, p.492).

“In a modern liberal arts education the tradition and the critique of the tradition can be one education about the modern appearance of first principles, an experience of itself as a culture where universalist claims, even or especially those of what humanity is or is not, mediate and undermine themselves”
(Tubbs, 2013, p.496)

This modern liberal arts education is unable to present the world as simple or knowable. Perhaps there is truth in John Henry Newman’s assertion about the value of education; “not to know the relative disposition of things is the state of slaves or children” (Newman, 1996, p.85). In a post-foundational university we *should* all be relegated to the status of slaves or children by questioning and our contradictory truths because that’s where we begin life outside of the university. There is an absurdity of contradiction and paradox which cuts through all parts of life now from the very practical absurdities of the precarious workforce or the absurdity inherent in the act of spending three years studying a specific subject with no hope of employment in that

field to the philosophical absurdity which has cut through concepts like truth and even the act of knowing itself. Tubbs argues that a modern liberal arts education must “let literature, old and new, speak its contradictions with regard to truth, and let students learn of the meanings of these experiences within the experience of modern metaphysics” (Tubbs, 2013, p 497). It is now more important for the student-graduate to be versed in complexity, difficulty, difference and absurdity than in a self-sure knowledge which no longer represents the reality of the world, economic or otherwise.

Conclusion

I believe a fitting conclusion to the question of the value of higher education in our precarious present and future is to remind ourselves of the cost of doing nothing. The working class student who faces an uphill struggle to enter higher education now leaves with £50,000 in debt (if they choose to do so in England). They will enter a world of work which is more precarious, more hostile and less secure than ever before. Ivor Southwood, whose book *Non-Stop Inertia* I used to describe the realities of precarious work, graduated with a degree in literature and the debt which accompanies it. He describes the reality faced by great swathes of the graduate population today, a reality which only stands to spread, and we must ask what can prepare someone not only to survive this but to thrive outside the economic sphere and to become wholly human:

“daily life becomes precarious. Planning ahead becomes difficult, routines are impossible to establish. Work, of whatever sort, might begin or end anywhere at

a moment's notice, and the burden is always on the worker to create the next opportunity and to surf between roles. The individual must exist in a state of constant readiness. Predictable income, savings, the fixed category of 'occupation': all belong to another historical world"

(Southwood, 2011, p.15)

References

- Gray, H. H. (2012). *Searching for Utopia*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Hutchins, R. M. (1988). *The Great Conversation*. Chicago: Encyclopaedia Britannica.
- Kierkegaard, S. (2003). *The Soul of Kierkegaard*. Mineola: Dover Publications.
- Kimball, B. (1986). *Orators and Philosophers*. New York: Teachers College Press.
- Newman, J. H. (2003). *The Idea of a University*. Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press.
- Nixon, E., Scullion, R., & Hearn, R. (2016). Her Majesty the Student: Marketised higher education and the narcissistic (dis) satisfactions of the student-consumer. *Studies in Higher Education*, 1-21.
- Oxenham, M. (2013). *Higher Education in Liquid Modernity*. Oxford: Routledge.
- Southwood, I. (2011). *Non-Stop Inertia*. Winchester: Zero Books.
- Srnicek, N., & Williams, A. (2015). *Inventing the Future*. London: Verso.
- Steffen, H. (2010). Student Internships and the Privilege to Work. *Cultural Logic*, 1-20.
- Tubbs, N. (2013). Humanitas, Metaphysics and Modern Liberal Arts. *Educational Philosophy and Theory*, 488-498.
- Tubbs, N. (2015). *Philosophy and Modern Liberal Arts Education*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

Notes

-
- ⁱ <https://www.prospects.ac.uk/careers-advice/what-can-i-do-with-my-degree/history> - 'What can I do with my degree? History' – Prospects.ac.uk
- ⁱⁱ <https://www.hesa.ac.uk/collection/c15018/a/empbasis/> Destinations of Leavers from Higher Education record 2015/16 – this page demonstrates the different options available in the DLHE survey once a student has been recorded as 'employed'.
- ⁱⁱⁱ <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/education-27486606> 'Degree courses 'not value for money', say many students' – BBC News
- ^{iv} <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/science-environment-37408013> 'Teleportation step toward quantum internet' – BBC News