



Changing the narrative

Valuing Arts and Humanities degrees

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Introduction

A discussion on employment outcomes for Arts and Humanities (A&H) graduates in Wales was held in on 24 April 2024 in Cardiff. It was organised in response to a powerful UK-wide narrative about the financial value of higher education, which tends to label A&H degrees as 'low value' (costing a lot without improving career prospects).

The event was attended by academics, university leaders, students, graduates, representatives from think tanks, colleagues from employer bodies, and colleagues from the Higher Education Funding Council for Wales.

This paper provides a brief summary of the key points arising from the event. It is intended as a resource for university administrators, academics, students, employers, employees and policymakers when having conversations on this issue within and beyond their own organisations.

Key discussion points

- A&H graduates have **broadly comparable employment and salary prospects** to those graduating in other subjects, when considered over the entire course of a career.
- The Graduate Outcomes Survey, which is the accepted measure of graduate achievement, is a snapshot taken 15 months after graduation. It presents a **misleading picture** of the financial value of an A&H degree when considered across an entire career.

- A&H graduates are particularly well equipped with the kinds of **transferable skills that employers require**, such as creative and analytical thinking.
- The public debate on A&H degrees tends to focus on the question of value (i.e. remuneration) for individual graduates, at the expense of the **broader value of A&H degrees** to the economy and to society.
- The A&H disciplines need to do a better job of **telling the story of their value**, both economic and social, to policymakers and to the public. This is important because public perceptions drive the subject choices that students make at school as well as at university.

Further explanation of these points can be found in the following sections.

Problems with the accepted measures of value

Recent UK-wide research, for example by the [British Academy](#) (2020) and the [Higher Education Policy Institute](#) (2023), suggests that the A&H “employability problem” is largely a myth. A&H graduates have broadly comparable employment and salary prospects to those graduating in other subjects, when considered over the entire course of a career. Their transferable skills also give them options in a larger range of sectors and professions and make them more resilient to economic shocks.

These findings are mirrored when looking at [HESA data](#) from the [Graduate Outcomes \(GO\) survey](#) for students graduating from Welsh HEIs. There is no statistically significant difference between A&H disciplines and other subject areas in levels of graduate employability. In terms of starting salaries, there is only a small statistically significant difference between A&H disciplines and other subject areas, which disappears when a handful of selected disciplines that offer particularly high salaries at the outset (e.g., economics, medicine) are factored out.

Moreover, the above findings are primarily based upon the GO survey, which is run 15 months after graduation. Its short timeframe does not adequately capture the career prospects of graduates from A&H subjects, where career pathways are more open and flexible compared to vocational or technical subjects, and graduates therefore often take longer to determine their onward

routes. In addition, the GO survey splits jobs into 'graduate level' and 'non-graduate level', with the data showing that A&H graduates in Wales are less likely than those graduating from STEMM subjects (Science, Technology, Engineering, Mathematics and Medicine) or other more vocational courses to be in what the GO survey classes as 'graduate level' roles. However, this classification is problematic because it is based on job title rather than salary. In addition, it takes little account of either the varied shapes careers can take in different sectors, or of graduate career plans and preferences.

The snapshot provided by the GO survey is therefore an inadequate measure of how good a return on investment a degree is. Because it captures roles at an early stage, it is not structured to take account of subsequent career progression beyond entry-level positions. The results thus favour vocational degrees which are likely to lead to what the survey classes as 'graduate level' roles more directly. Moreover, distinctions about which kinds of jobs are 'graduate level' are often not helpful when considering the varied career trajectories of A&H graduates.

The survey also fails to capture the successes of graduates who attain such roles after the 15-month survey point. These limitations have already received some recognition. For instance, the UK Government has sponsored the creation of [longitudinal graduate outcome data](#), whilst HESA is working to develop measures of job quality measures around [wellbeing rather than remuneration](#).

Nonetheless, the GO survey remains the mechanism of choice for measuring (and publicising) the success of graduates and thereby the value of their degrees.

Skills and value: reality and perception

Degrees that equip students with vocational skills often have more defined career routes and can therefore tend to lead to entry level roles that are more highly paid than the average and that are considered 'graduate level' by the GO survey. This is a tempting prospect for policymakers, students and parents. However, such a short-term outlook neglects the longer-term economic and social contribution of transferable skills and values-driven career motivations characteristic of A&H graduates. Nor does it acknowledge the wider range of employment options that are potentially open to graduates with such transferable skills, not only at the start of their careers but also later on, in response to new interests or changing economic circumstances.

The [World Economic Forum Future of Jobs Report](#) (2023) asked employers about the key skills they need their employees to have, as well as which skills they think will increase in importance over the next few years. The top three future-facing skills they listed were creative thinking, analytical thinking, and technological literacy. These are all transferable skills rather than vocational. They are also skills that A&H degrees are particularly well suited to developing, and, in the case of technological literacy, are increasingly equipping their students with.

This global picture is supported by informal surveying of local employers (primarily retail and third sector) in Cardiff and the south-east of Wales.

Employers report that it is often A&H graduates who take on project leader roles,

thanks to their analytical and creative skills. A&H graduates are also highly valued for their communication skills, which are particularly important when working across Wales' socially and culturally diverse communities. That said, it is easier for large organisations to take the long view, waiting for graduates with transferable skills to bed in and show their worth. Smaller organisations tend to want employees who are already trained and see graduates with vocational skills as meeting this need.

One of the most convincing arguments for the ongoing value of A&H subjects and the skills they confer upon graduates is the impact of new technologies such as generative AI. This is likely to have profound effects on many professions and could render some that draw primarily on vocational skills obsolete. However, transferable skills such as analytical thinking, creative thinking and resilience/flexibility cannot be provided by technology alone, at least not in the foreseeable future, and A&H graduates are particularly well positioned to supply them.

Despite the opportunities that A&H subjects offer graduates through the transferable skills they teach, public perceptions of an employability 'problem' are having negative impacts on [the numbers pursuing them at school](#). This then leads to falling recruitment at degree level. This is the result of a short-term and instrumental view of educational 'value', whether at school or university, which is driven both by political rhetoric and by the inadequate quantitative measures discussed above. It also contributes to a relative lack of diversity amongst A&H graduates compared to other subject areas, which is especially problematic

because their skills often equip them well to connect with a diverse range of people.

Finally, the public debate on A&H degrees tends to conflate questions of value (i.e. remuneration) for the graduate with value to the economy and value to society. These are three distinct issues. For instance, Creative Arts graduates tend to have lower starting salaries than many other subject areas, but they often measure 'value' in non-financial ways, such as job satisfaction and contribution to society. Even so, they work in [many of the Welsh economy's fastest growing sectors](#) and are responsible for a disproportionate number of start-ups. Equally, a trained teacher is arguably more valuable to society than a trained accountant, yet our current means of measuring the value of that person's degree (in terms of starting salaries and direct wealth generation) tell us the opposite.

What might be done?

There is much that HEIs could do internally to address some of the issues outlined above. There is further work to be done in embedding the teaching of employability into A&H degrees, through existing mechanisms such as authentic assessment, placements and internships, and highlighting to students how their studies equip them for roles that involve problem-solving, entrepreneurialism and leadership. HEIs can certainly do more to give their A&H students the conceptual tools they need to better articulate the nature and value of their transferable skills to employers and the wider public. Bringing employers themselves into that discussion, as part of industry advisory panels or similar, would be an important element of this work – and is already happening in some quarters. HEIs might also work more with secondary schools to combat negative perceptions of A&H disciplines and thus reverse the declining pipeline of school-leavers moving onto A&H degrees.

More broadly, the current measures used to determine the value of a degree to a graduate paint an inadvertently misleading picture for A&H subjects. That point needs to be made to politicians and policymakers. However, the argument needs to be part of a wider case about the value of A&H graduates to the economy and society in the round. An instrumental argument alone, about the individual financial pay-off of doing an A&H degree, will not be enough until other measures, which address the limitations of the existing data and thereby tell a different story, are in place.

In order to change public perceptions, a clearer and simpler message about the social and economic contribution of A&H subjects is needed. What is the story that A&H has to tell? Here there is much to learn from STEMM subjects, which have successfully coordinated to communicate a strong story, including via a widely-recognised acronym, public-facing organisations, and active advocacy aimed at policy makers. The A&H story will similarly need to be disseminated with a strong and unified voice. This will require collaboration between HEIs in Wales and beyond, along with sector-wide bodies such as the Learned Society of Wales.

