The Humanities Under Threat?

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1. The bafflement of many academics in face of the current radical restructuring of English higher education is understandable. It is not obvious why a successful sector should face the perfect storm of simultaneous changes in student funding, research funding, research assessment, and new restrictive visa rules for overseas non-EU students and staff.

2. The huge restructuring currently under way in England is not just the whim of one government or one political party. It began under the previous government.

3. The belief that the current changes are particularly a threat to the humanities, although widely held, may be wrong.

4. There are fears, heightened by the debate about the incoming Research Excellence Framework, that across all subjects the pursuit of scholarship for its own sake is yielding to a more instrumental and even directed view of research.

5. The actual changes to the funding of teaching that are being implemented by the present government are ‘subject-neutral’ and should not be seen as a calculated assault on the humanities.

6. The problem that is faced by the humanities as a result of the student funding changes is not so much deliberate attack, but unintended consequences, including instability in demand for particular courses.

7. Postgraduate studies, which have been under-funded in the UK for decades, have been largely neglected in the 2010 Browne Review and the June 2011 higher education white paper.

Conclusion. There is a need to be precise about the particular problems faced. The threats and instability that confront UK higher education are neither confined to, nor particularly targeted at, the humanities.