



# University Degrees of Higher Worth - vis-à-vis Sunak

## Abstract

The RT Hon Rishi Sunak MP, the first of his kind in the history of the UK, as a minority and from immigrant parents, announced in the same week that his government pushed through the Anti-immigration bill that he will restrict Universities from running courses which are in his vision of 'low worth'. This created unrest among the academic circles, who took to Twitter to report how they have personally gained and gainfully contributed to society with the 'lower worth' higher qualifications. There was also the band of social scientists who described how this elitist view is designed to reduce the access to students from multiple deprivation backgrounds to courses such as arts, humanities, and philosophy which are truly then reserved for those from the top of the socio-economic food chain. This argument or viewpoint is not new and nor will it be the last time that such a debate is had in society. This debate about what knowledge or study is considered useful or gainful in society can be described in economic or utilitarian versus philosophical terms.

## Keywords

University degrees, Higher worth, utilitarianism

## Background

The value of university degrees in society can be significant and multifaceted. University degrees often serve as a prerequisite for many professional careers. They provide graduates with specialised knowledge and skills that are relevant to their chosen fields, making them essential for certain professions and attractive to employers.

Many job listings specifically require a certain level of education and having a degree can open doors to a wider range of job opportunities. On average, individuals with university degrees tend to earn more over their lifetimes compared to those without degrees.<sup>1</sup>

This wage premium varies depending on the field of study, but in general, higher education can lead to higher-paying

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jobs and better career advancement opportunities. University education goes beyond just knowledge acquisition. It helps students develop critical thinking, problem-solving, communication, and research skills, among others.<sup>2,3</sup> These skills are not only valuable in the workplace but also in everyday life, contributing to personal growth and societal development. In many societies, having a university degree is associated with a certain level of prestige and social status.<sup>4</sup> Obtaining a degree is often seen as an achievement and a sign of dedication to one's education and future prospects. University education equips individuals with the expertise needed to address complex societal challenges and contribute to the advancement of knowledge in various fields. Graduates may go on to become researchers, innovators, policymakers, or professionals who shape society and its progress. For many people, pursuing higher education is an important life goal. It offers the opportunity to study subjects of interest and passion, leading to personal fulfilment and a sense of accomplishment. Universities provide an environment for students to build social and professional networks. These connections can be invaluable in finding job opportunities, collaborating on projects, and accessing resources throughout one's career. It's important to note that the value of university degrees can vary depending on factors such as the reputation of the institution, the specific field of study, and the individual's dedication to learning and applying knowledge gained during their education. While degrees can offer numerous advantages, they are not the sole determinant of success, and many successful individuals have achieved their goals without a university degree.<sup>5</sup> Ultimately, the value of a university degree is influenced by the ever-changing dynamics of the job market, societal norms, and individual aspirations.

A society that is growing and maturing needs its citizens to read the basics of science, mathematics, and technical subjects. This knowledge is gained and handed on purely for an applied purpose. In a way that it helps design and run machinery, factories, production lines, hospitals, and so on. One can describe such knowledge as leading to blue-

collar jobs or industries. All modern societies have been through the process of industrialisation and there has been a significant impact of such applied knowledge generation on people's living standards, wealth acquisition, and improvement in health. Britain went through this phase during the period of the Victorian and early Elizabethan era. So Rishi Sunak is right in wanting to go back to the heady days of production in Britain. We have also heard of similar aspirations from his counterpart in the USA and in India with their '*Make in India*'<sup>6</sup> or '*Make America Great Again*'<sup>7</sup> rhetoric.

### Arts and Humanities

What he is missing is that once a certain equilibrium is reached by such societies, and people can turn from toil to thinking - art, humanities, and philosophy flourish.<sup>8</sup> The study of arts and humanities holds significant value in society, even though their benefits might not always be as immediately apparent as more vocational or technical fields. Arts and humanities degrees foster an appreciation for literature, history, philosophy, art, language, and other aspects of culture. They encourage students to explore different perspectives, develop empathy, and better understand the complexities of the human experience. This cultural enrichment contributes to a more well-rounded and informed society. It encourages critical thinking, analysis, and creative problem-solving. Graduates in these fields learn to think critically, question assumptions, and communicate effectively, skills that are highly transferable to various professional settings. They often emphasise effective communication through writing, public speaking, and interpersonal interactions. These skills are valuable in almost every career and are essential for building strong relationships and conveying ideas persuasively. They play a vital role in preserving cultural heritage and traditions. Graduates may become educators, archivists, or advocates for cultural preservation, ensuring that societies retain their unique identities and histories.

The study of humanities can help individuals develop emotional intelligence by examining

human behaviour, emotions, and societal norms. This understanding can be beneficial in personal relationships and leadership roles. Arts and humanities graduates are often adept at adapting to change, finding creative solutions, and thinking outside the box. These qualities are increasingly valued in a rapidly evolving job market where innovation is essential. Many arts and humanities graduates become advocates for social justice, equality, and human rights. They may work in NGOs, public policy, journalism, or advocacy roles, using their knowledge and empathy to address societal challenges. Arts and humanities degrees can intersect with other fields, leading to interdisciplinary knowledge and collaboration. This interdisciplinary approach is becoming more valuable as complex global challenges often require diverse expertise. The arts and cultural sectors contribute significantly to the economy, creating jobs and fostering creative industries. Arts and humanities graduates play a role in supporting and advancing these sectors.

While arts and humanities degrees may not always lead directly to specific job titles, they provide graduates with valuable skills and a broader understanding of the world. Many employers recognize the value of these degrees and seek candidates with strong critical thinking, communication, and problem-solving abilities. Moreover, pursuing a passion for the arts or humanities can lead to personal fulfilment, a strong sense of purpose, and a lifelong love of learning. This has been described in historical analysis of societies in Greek, Roman, Indus Valley, and Egyptian times. Even in relatively newer societies (1000 AD onwards) in Europe, America, and Asia we have plenty of examples of philosophy and art flourishing in times of peace and prosperity.<sup>9</sup> Humanity's greatest creations are those that reflect such thinking.

There is a fundamental requisite for the human mind to change from survival to reflection - and that is to be provided a level of creature comfort and sustenance. Even in relatively newer societies (1000 AD onwards) in Europe, America, and Asia, there are numerous examples of philosophy and art flourishing during periods of peace and prosperity, such as

Pax Romana, the Italian Renaissance (14th to 17th centuries, Europe) - a period of immense cultural and artistic growth in Italy. Supported by the patronage of wealthy families and city-states, artists like Leonardo da Vinci, Michelangelo, and Raphael created masterpieces in painting, sculpture, and architecture. Philosophers like Machiavelli and Pico della Mirandola also made significant contributions to political and philosophical thought. The Golden Age of Islam (8th to 14th centuries, Middle East and North Africa): During this era, the Islamic world experienced significant advancements in various fields. Scholars like Avicenna (Ibn Sina) and Averroes (Ibn Rushd) made significant contributions to philosophy and Islamic thought, while poets like Rumi and Omar Khayyam produced enduring literary works.<sup>10</sup> Edo Period (17th to 19th centuries, Japan): The Edo period in Japan was characterised by relative peace and stability under the Tokugawa shogunate.<sup>11</sup> During this time, traditional Japanese arts, including ukiyo-e woodblock prints, Noh theatre, and haiku poetry, flourished. Bengal Renaissance (19th and early 20th centuries, India): The Bengal Renaissance was a period of intellectual and cultural revival in Bengal, India. It saw the emergence of influential figures like Rabindranath Tagore, who won the Nobel Prize in Literature, and Swami Vivekananda, a philosopher and spiritual leader.<sup>12</sup>

These examples demonstrate that periods of peace and prosperity have often been catalysts for intellectual and artistic flourishing in various societies and time periods. The stability and resources available during such times have allowed individuals to engage in creative and philosophical pursuits, resulting in lasting contributions to humanity's cultural heritage. Hence the arts have always flourished under patronage. Patronage often came from benevolent leaders who had acquired their power and wealth by using the tools produced by industrial or engineering progress.

So, we come full circle. So why is there such an academic uproar among the intelligentsia?

What becomes apparent when one studies the rise and fall of civilisations, is that there is a

division in society along the lines of those who could engage in 'higher' intellectual pursuits and therefore retain their position at the helm of society. At the same time, the rest are allowed to continue to strive for their daily bread. When studying the rise and fall of civilizations, it can indeed become apparent that there is often a division in society along the lines of those who can engage in "higher" intellectual pursuits and retain positions of power and influence, while the majority of the population may be primarily focused on meeting their basic needs and livelihoods. This division is referred to as elitism, social stratification or social hierarchy which perpetuates different classes based on factors like wealth, education, and influence. The elite class, possessing intellectual prowess and power, may enjoy privileges and resources inaccessible to the majority. If the elite class earns their positions through merit and capability, a meritocratic society could argue that the best and brightest are leading and influencing decisions, ultimately benefiting the broader population. However, it also raises questions about inequalities and social injustice. However, societal divisions are not solely determined by intellectual pursuits or privilege alone. Factors like gender, race, ethnicity, and social class can also play significant roles in shaping the structure of a society. The study of the rise and fall of civilizations often reveals complex interactions between various societal factors that contribute to the dynamics of social stratification.

As we continue to learn from history, it is crucial to address inequalities and strive for a more inclusive and equitable society where everyone can pursue intellectual growth, contribute to the betterment of society, and enjoy a fulfilling life. In Indian society from the time of the Vedas, societal hierarchy always placed knowledge (acquired and protected by Brahmins) above power (held by Kshatriyas) and business (practised by Vaidyas) and so on. This caste-based societal structure created a division of labour based on birth, with each varna having a specific role and responsibility. Knowledge, especially religious and philosophical knowledge, was held in high esteem, and the Brahmins were expected to

preserve and transmit this knowledge through generations. The rigidity of the caste system often prevented social mobility and limited opportunities for individuals to pursue the roles they were most interested in or suited for. Over time, the caste system became associated with discrimination, exploitation, and social divisions. Modern Indian society may appear one of the equal opportunities as described by the longest-written constitution in the world, but a small proportion of Brahmins and Khatriyas hold and protect ninety per cent of the wealth and power that exists. The rest are allowed to toil for their daily bread and work in the industrial hinterlands.

Society in Communist China is no different as the power is held by those who understand and follow the philosophical principles of Marxism. In a communist system like China, the party's understanding of Marxism and its interpretation of socialist principles play a central role in governance and policymaking. The CPC's leadership implement policies that align with their interpretation of Marxism and their vision of socialism in China.

However, it is important to note that in practice, China's modern political and economic system has evolved significantly from classical Marxist theory. The country has adopted a mixed economy, combining elements of socialism and market-oriented reforms, leading to significant economic growth and development over the past few decades.

### Philosophy & Science

Physics often transcends the organic and conceptualizes the unknown. So, philosophy and the quest for '*the unknown*' is sometimes described as religion, by some. Philosophers seek to explore the unknown through critical thinking, rational analysis, and contemplation. Philosophy and physics can complement each other.<sup>13</sup> Philosophical inquiries can address foundational questions that lie beyond the scope of physics. For example, philosophy can explore the nature of time, causality, the origin of the universe, and the implications of scientific theories. At the same time, physics

can inform philosophical discussions about the nature of reality and our place in the universe.

Philosophy and spirituality are distinct but not mutually exclusive. While philosophy may explore questions about the existence of a higher power or the nature of the soul, spirituality often involves personal beliefs, experiences, and practices that go beyond purely rational inquiry. Some individuals integrate philosophical reflection with their spiritual beliefs, seeking a deeper understanding of their faith or personal worldview. The relationship between spirituality and physics can be complex and varied. For some individuals, spiritual beliefs may coexist with scientific understanding, and they might find awe and wonder in the mysteries of the cosmos. Others may seek to reconcile their spiritual beliefs with scientific findings, often engaging in dialogue between science and religion. Ultimately, the interactions between philosophy, physics, and spirituality are diverse and can vary from person to person. Some individuals may find harmony between these areas of inquiry, while others may see them as distinct and separate aspects of human understanding. The pursuit of knowledge and meaning in each of these domains contributes to our broader understanding of ourselves and the universe we inhabit.

The purpose of this editorial is not to delve into such areas that are lesser known but to reiterate that alongside STEM subjects which may lead to gainful employment, most mature and progressive societies need to provide patronage to the pursuit of arts, humanities and philosophy. The patronage of arts and humanities can play a crucial role in fostering a progressive society. While not the sole factor, it contributes significantly to the cultural, intellectual, and social development of a community. While patronage of arts and humanities is vital for a progressive society, it is essential to strike a balance with other areas of social development, such as education, healthcare, and infrastructure. A holistic approach that values both the practical and cultural aspects of society contribute to a truly progressive and flourishing community. Governments, private organisations, and

individuals all have roles to play in supporting and promoting the arts and humanities for the collective benefit of society. That is the true marker of a progressive society and one that is likely to survive the next millennia.

As many of the readers of this journal are health professionals, we understand our role via our education and training to apply the knowledge we have received through apprenticeship. Much of the several years of training we receive is designed to amass a fountainhead of factual knowledge and apply it to processes and protocols to provide care. Rarely do health professionals get a chance to delve into the acquisition of new knowledge or explore unknown causes of maladies or uncharted treatment options, unless one is privileged to have funded time for research. Even in research and academic circles, there is less opportunity for bench research or undertaking truly novel phase-one trials.

#### Utilitarianism in Education

Much of our education did not teach us to ask why but merely to accept and apply. That is a fundamental folly of such utilitarianism in education and one that Rishi Sunak's metrics of gainful degrees may not support. The lack of emphasis on critical thinking and questioning in some educational systems can indeed be seen as a fundamental folly of an overly utilitarian approach to education. Utilitarianism in education often prioritises practical skills and immediate applicability of knowledge, which can lead to a neglect of fostering curiosity, analytical thinking, and a deeper understanding of the world.<sup>14</sup> By focusing solely on rote memorisation and practical skills, learners may be discouraged from asking "why" and exploring topics beyond the immediate curriculum. This stifles their natural curiosity and creativity, hindering their ability to think independently and pursue knowledge beyond prescribed boundaries. When learners are taught to accept and apply information without understanding the underlying principles or concepts, they struggle to grasp the broader implications and interconnectedness of knowledge. Understanding "why" something works a certain way is essential for building a strong

foundation for further learning. Critical thinking is a crucial skill for evaluating information, solving problems, and making informed decisions. If education primarily focuses on accepting and applying information without encouraging critical inquiry, students may lack the ability to analyse, question, and assess the validity of the knowledge they encounter.

A "why" focused education promotes a growth mindset and a willingness to continuously learn and adapt to new challenges. Innovation often arises from questioning the status quo and exploring new possibilities. An education system that emphasises critical thinking and asking "why" nurtures innovative thinking and problem-solving abilities.

It's important to acknowledge that not all educational systems fall into this utilitarian trap, and many educators and institutions actively promote critical thinking and inquiry-based learning. A balanced approach that combines practical skills with critical thinking and creativity can lead to a more well-rounded education and better prepare students for the complexities of the modern world. Encouraging learners to ask "why" and fostering a culture of curiosity can lead to more engaged, motivated, and thoughtful learners.

Original research takes huge investment, opportunity and a safe environment to innovate. Many of us are merely trained operators who apply our craft but do not innovate. It takes a different mindset to be innovative and visionary. However, unless we allow our future generations to be visionary, innovate and accept that there will be many experiments or ideas that will be either considered crazy or fail miserably: no new knowledge will be produced, no progress will be achieved, and we will regress as a society. The history of human civilisation is full of ideas that did not fly and so it should be.<sup>15</sup> Research very rarely leads to significant original achievements that can be monetised, in Sunak terms. But progress is made. Science, Arts and Humanities must coexist, collaborate and codesign ideas to take forward. We must have social science working hand in hand with pure scientists and all should be working with

philosophers and historians, so we learn from our rich past and what is described as heritage.

### The Future Vision for Education

So we should encourage our young minds to be free to choose what they fancy, to fly and accept that falling is also part of learning. Absolutely, encouraging young minds to be free to choose what they fancy, to explore, and to accept that failure is a part of learning is vital for their growth and development. Allowing young minds to pursue their interests and passions fosters intrinsic motivation. When they are genuinely interested in a subject or activity, they are more likely to be engaged and dedicated to learning. Giving children the freedom to explore different subjects and activities enables them to discover their strengths, interests, and talents. It allows them to develop a well-rounded set of skills and knowledge. By accepting that failure is a natural part of the learning process, young minds can develop resilience and the ability to persevere in the face of challenges. This resilience is crucial for their personal and academic growth. When young minds are encouraged to explore freely, they are more likely to think outside the box and develop creative solutions to problems. Embracing their creativity can lead to innovative thinking in various aspects of life. Allowing children to make choices and experience the consequences of their decisions can boost their self-confidence and sense of independence. It empowers them to take ownership of their learning journey.

It's important to strike a balance between encouraging freedom and providing guidance and support. Parents, educators, and mentors can play a crucial role in nurturing a learning environment that allows young minds to fly freely while providing a safety net to catch them if they fall. Celebrating both successes and failures as opportunities for growth can instil a positive attitude towards learning and foster a resilient and confident mindset in young individuals. They must be allowed to ask why or why not. They must be given the freedom to for that is where the future success of our society and civilisation lies.

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