

# Is my humanities degree really as 'soft' as others would have me believe?

Studying literature for five years is not for the faint-hearted. When I first started my degree, I was led to believe that, if the brutally long reading lists didn't finish me off, then the 10,000 words I wrote per exam definitely would. At seventeen, I was warned about both things, but – Brontë-obsessed bookworm that I was – I refused to listen. Literature was my passion, and I wouldn't be stopped from pursuing it.

What no one told me, however, was that if you somehow survived the intense reading and writing regime, you would be sentenced to what feels like a lifetime of people asking, 'You study English lit? What can you even do with that?'



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With the release of A-Level results this month, there's been an outpouring of articles detailing the most popular subjects to study, along with the degrees that lead to the highest salaries and best job offers. For most of them, the conclusion they reached can be summed up as follows:



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STEM degrees are purposeful and lead to better jobs. Humanities degrees are wasteful and condemn one to years of underpaid drudgery.

Lately, however, I've become unconvinced by this idea that STEM = lucrative career prospects. Believe it or not, when I studied literature, I cultivated skills that would do well in a number of professions. I learned how to formulate arguments, both in verbal discussions and in written essays, which has done wonders for my strategic thinking. I learned how to synthesise and communicate complex information to people outside my discipline. My peers and I were also encouraged to solve the problems literature threw up as creatively as we could, and we would work together while doing so.

So hang on. Teamwork. Adept problem-solving. Strategic thinking. Communication. These all sound like the key skills employers tend to list on every single entry-level job listing.

If that's true, then logically speaking, it can't be the case that STEM graduates have the monopoly on high-paying jobs. To me, the above skills sound just as applicable to a Management Consultant – a famously lucrative career – as they would to someone working in Communications, a career path often viewed as less financially rewarding, and more 'typical' of literature graduates. In other words, a literature student is prepared for either, and condemned to neither.



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The fact is, we have gotten too comfortable with matching certain subjects to certain career outcomes. I don't dispute that those who want to work in IT would do well to go out and get themselves a degree in Computer Science. However, it is a step too far to suggest to A-Level students that, if they want to make money, they should only study STEM subjects. While many graduates in humanities do end up working in lower-paid jobs,

this is more a reflection of how those who decide to pursue more 'artsy' subjects often want to work in creative industries – because that is where they feel most fulfilled. Not because they weren't left with the skills to work in a sector with better career prospects.



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I wish I had a more definitive answer. But perhaps we could start with reminding ourselves what an achievement and privilege it is to go to university at all, and go from there.

It wasn't until I was several years into my studies that I realised how much the perception of English Literature as a 'vanity subject' had impacted the mindset of both myself and my peers. During my third year of university, my friends and I were asked – by an admittedly well-meaning chemical engineer – what literature students do on a daily basis. In response, we quipped, 'Oh, we just read books all day, it's great!' Essentially, we had begun accepting and believing that our subject offered no tangible value to the real world. For me, this reached fever pitch when I decided to do a postgraduate at Cambridge. In my first week, I met multiple people my age who were either on their way to curing cancer or were building electric airplanes for Rolls Royce.

It was humbling, to say the least.

However, believing that my degree was lesser than theirs was a mistake, and not just because the skills we learn when studying literature and science, and the value both disciplines offer, are too distinct to be compared with one another. Believing that I had chosen an easy degree also could have cost me the courage to change sectors and pursue consulting, or law, or a million other more financially prosperous careers, had I realised that was something I wanted to do.

The answer, therefore, is not to let students think that they are being better, or smarter, or even more ethical, when they choose to study one subject over another. What is, you ask?



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