

The Battle of the Sciences: UK government's STEM vs SHAPE priorities

Kimberley Burton, University of East Anglia

In the battle between academic disciplines, a clear winner has emerged. The British government's priorities in research and development, education, and even immigration policy are loud and clear: STEM subjects are more valued than SHAPE (Social Sciences, Humanities and the Arts for People and the Economy) subjects.

In July of last year, the government unveiled its [Research and Development roadmap](#). The roadmap prioritises investment in research and innovation to cement the UK's status as a "world-leading science superpower" and deliver economic growth and societal benefits across the UK for decades to come. To tackle the major challenges British society will face in the future (such as climate change, global pandemics, and population growth), the roadmap outlines that both technological solutions and the understanding of human behaviour to produce social and cultural change will be required.

However, despite the critical role SHAPE disciplines have in rebuilding Britain post-pandemic, they are not heavily featured in the plans, raising important questions, in my opinion, about the value of different types of skills and knowledge.

For example, part of the R&D roadmap concerns the government's immigration policy. The [Office for Talent](#) seeks to streamline the immigration process for researchers and entrepreneurs to work and study in the UK. However, "talent" is not defined universally -- individuals with a PhD in a STEM subject receive ten additional points than those with PhDs in other fields. There is no doubt that this is a triumph for the STEM sector, but for the UK to truly become a world-class research and dynamic innovation destination, I feel equal investment in STEM and SHAPE is integral.

A recent report commissioned by the government in its [review of post-18 education and funding](#) recommended that ministers aim to reduce university tuition fees from £9,250 to £7,500 to decrease the student loan burden. Yet, the cost of science degrees will be topped up by extra government funding to encourage more students to take STEM degrees, leaving arts and humanities degrees to bear the brunt of these changes. Some universities ([Aston University, London South Bank, and Hull University](#)) are already cutting humanities courses due to lack of funds and students. Others are set to follow, as the government continues to prioritise ['skilled trades' and 'vocational courses' over courses perceived as 'less essential'](#) or leading to lower-paid work, to deliver anticipated infrastructure investments as the economy recovers from the pandemic.

The government has [already made 50% cuts to arts subjects](#) effective this month, despite a national campaign and much public outcry. This month's highly anticipated universities spending review is expected to feature other detrimental changes to so-called "low value" degrees.

The disdain in which SHAPE subjects have been treated has even led to a rebranding scheme by the British Academy, with the new acronym '[SHAPE](#)' to promote the humanities and social sciences in the hopes of gaining greater public status and to challenge the harmful narrative of "soft" or "low value" subjects.

In my opinion, the current government's treatment of the arts and humanities is misguided. In fact, SHAPE subjects such as politics and international studies are needed more than ever to build active citizens who can think for themselves, identify 'fake news', and hold authority to account in times of extreme political uncertainty. While the demand for skills is broadening, the government's focus is increasingly narrow, subjecting the arts and humanities to increasing risk.

Despite common misconceptions, [the British Academy highlights that arts, humanities, and social sciences graduates are indeed 'Qualified for the Future.'](#) They are highly employable across various sectors due to their abundance of employable skills from the varied nature of their courses, enabling them to build flexible careers that withstand economic downturns.

As an undergraduate student studying IR, I believe the underlying purpose of my degree is to encourage an open-mindedness of students, demonstrating, through analysis and examination, an appreciation of multiple perspectives of current global affairs. My studies shape me and my peers to become more empathetic and [globally competent](#) individuals. Hence, it is incredibly disheartening to learn that many programmes are labelled '[worthless](#)' by the British the government, who value education as an economic commodity. Somewhat hypocritically, this narrative has also ignored the fact that the hypocritical nature that many MPs, themselves, [have SHAPE degrees](#), with 20% holding degrees in Politics and 13% in History.

I believe that the SHAPE disciplines have an essential role in helping the public and policymakers move forward to create a [positive, post-pandemic future for society, the economy, the environment, and beyond](#). They should not be underestimated in producing a highly-qualified and versatile labour force to create a more resilient UK.

Kimberley Burton is a third-year International Relations student at the University of East Anglia.