Employability and the English Literature Degree

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Abstract: In this essay, Stephen Longstaffe suggests that integrating employability into the curriculum of an English Literature degree can offer both intellectual challenge and practical advantages to students. Using the model of the University of Cumbria’s English Literature degree, the chapter argues that the subject can better ensure its survival as a university discipline by developing a critical model of ‘English in the World’ to inform teaching and learning throughout the undergraduate degree. It suggests that improving students’ employability in this way can lead to greater student satisfaction and improved graduate employment. Through designing and supervising student projects, academics can also engage with a range of potential stakeholders with possible benefits for understanding how ‘impact’ might be better incorporated into future research projects.

English graduates remain surprisingly employable. For a subject involving way too much dallying with daffodils, probably yoked by violence together, and far too little concern with ‘Facts’, it remains a respectable degree for those averse to a life of destitution. For those leaving university in 2012, 8.5 per cent were unemployed six months later; for English graduates, the proportion was 8.6 per cent. As recently as five years ago, longitudinal surveys confirmed that, though things take a while to sort out (and a very high proportion of English graduates study in other areas en route) an English degree was about as good as a Business Studies degree in setting you up for a graduate job within three and a half years of graduating.

How secure is English Literature, though? Robert Eaglestone and Simon Kövesi have linked the ‘current perilous state of modern languages’ in the university to them being made optional at GCSE (General Certificate of Secondary Education) level in 2004, and warn of a similar fate for English Literature. Recent proposed changes to the ways that English schools’ performance at GCSE is measured have been modified to make the position of English Literature at GCSE more secure, but the situation is still extremely volatile. In the same article Eaglestone and Kövesi warn of an increasing divide between Russell Group and other English departments, with the former expanding at the expense of the latter. Though overall numbers attending university in the UK remain capped for now, restrictions were removed in 2012, initially on candidates gaining AAB+ grades (at least two As and a B) at A-level, as part of a government move towards the introduction of a free market into undergraduate recruitment. English’s very high entry points scores (more than 50 per cent of acceptances onto university English degrees in 2013 had AAB or better) mean that the subject has seen the emergence of a fairly sizeable free market. Winners and losers are already becoming apparent, the latter in the unwelcome form of departmental closures and reconfigurations.

Decisions on departmental closure, of course, are not made by ‘the market’ but by university managers, and here too the position of English as a discipline has weakened. Recruitment to the Arts and Humanities subjects as a proportion of total university admissions has fallen since 2008, with particularly precipitous falls in admissions to combined degrees. It remains to be seen how many departments’ English provision relied on students on combined degrees, but the news cannot be good. There were almost exactly the same numbers of students studying English in 2013 as in 2008; but as the total number of undergraduates