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Harvard and the Case For 4

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It is time for a change. England's universities should move away from three-year degrees. We ought to go to four years – emulating the sensible Scots and Americans.

The first reason for switching to 4-year degrees is a cheery one. Statistically, my funeral is likely to be on July 14 in the year 2034 (everyone welcome). Britons today are living much longer; therefore it pays them to invest more in education. In 1900, the entire allotted span of a male in Great Britain averaged 45 years. Now it nudges 80. Fairly obviously, it does not make sense for the length of our tertiary education to stay constant as longevity shoots up.

The second reason for 4-year degrees is philosophical. Students need to know about Socrates, Spearman, Samuelson and Skinner. Yet British universities are producing students who are narrowly trained by the standards of a genuinely liberal education. There is lots to be said for a politics degree, for instance, but maybe even more for one that is mixed with other subjects (like the famous PPE design at Oxford). When teaching in America years ago, I still remember the student whom I asked: 'what other courses are you taking this semester apart from mine on Macroeconomics?' 'Shakespeare and Astrophysics' came the answer.

Perhaps because this is being written on a damp afternoon in the centre of Cambridge Massachusetts, I am particularly on the side of John Henry Newman. His book *The Idea of a University* says pithily: "If a student's reading is confined simply to one subject, however such division of labour may favour the advancement of a particular pursuit, it has a tendency to contract his mind."

The case for breadth makes intuitive sense. But our nation is not practised at getting undergraduates to be good at, and knowledgeable about, a broad group of subjects. British higher education still encourages specialisation.

My hunch is that we are entering an age where width will matter more than depth. Right up my street, in two senses, Harvard University is recognising that.

Its new Curricular Review, which can be found on the internet under harvard.edu if you are interested, is proposing that each student, who already all do four-year degrees, should choose their 'major' subject in the middle of the second year, instead of, as currently, in the middle of their first. Harvard also wants every student to continue studying a foreign language and to be better educated in science. It has just sent out acceptance letters to the 2074 undergraduates who are to start degrees in September 2005. Their education will be expensive, although Larry Summers, who is President, has introduced a new rule that a Harvard degree will be costless to students from families with incomes under \$40,000. Two-thirds of Harvard undergraduates will receive some form of financial aid, including scholarships, loans, and jobs. The average total student aid package for incoming students will be slightly less than \$30,000.

Mr Summers also wants students to know about the world outside the USA. However, despite requiring its students to have international experience while an undergraduate, actual foreign citizens will number only 175 of the student incomers in September. That fact makes me wonder, actually, about the truth of the idea that Harvard selects only on merit. For the record, approximately 23 percent of the new students list biology as their proposed major, while 9 percent say they are attracted to the physical sciences, 8 percent to engineering, 8 percent to mathematics, and a mere 1 percent to computer science. The social sciences appeal to 24 percent, and 27 percent aim to major in the humanities. Economics is currently the single most popular major at Harvard.

The third reason for 4-year degrees in Britain is practical. Students arguably need a broader range of skills than years ago. Machines have become adept at making things without humans around them to

hear the chugging and clicking. Almost everyone now makes their way in the world by thinking, writing and speaking. Balanced human beings are likely to prosper in this kind of future.

Finally, those who want to save our universities' chemistry and German departments should do so by supporting the idea of 4-year liberal arts degrees. I think that most people are against the closure of these small departments because, deep down, they intuitively sense that there is more to university education than knowing a vast amount about rather little.

The case for 4, with a general liberal arts year at the outset, is powerful.