WE NEED TO TALK ABOUT GRADUATES

THE PROBLEM IS NOT THE STUDENTS. IT IS WHAT THE DEGREE NO LONGER PROVES

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SUMMARY

WE NEED *to Talk About Graduates* asks a question that universities, employers and parents can no longer avoid: what does the word ‘graduate’ now prove?

The problem is not that universities have stopped producing impressive people. They have not. Many students still leave university with stronger minds, deeper knowledge, better skills, larger ambitions and a clearer sense of what they can contribute. But the degree itself is becoming a weaker signal. Mass participation, grade inflation, student debt, wider support needs, AI-assisted work and a more uncertain graduate labour market have all changed what sits behind the credential.

The essay argues that the graduate label now hides too much variation. It may still indicate completion, persistence and real achievement, but it no longer reliably tells employers whether someone can write clearly, think independently, use AI intelligently, accept criticism or work under ordinary pressure.

This is not an argument against students. It is an argument for honesty. If the degree is to retain trust, it must prove real added value: that the graduate leaves with stronger skills, deeper knowledge, sharper judgement and greater capability than when they entered.

FROM THE INSTITUTIONS TO WHAT THEY PRODUCE

In my essay, *Academia’s Problems Just Got Worse*, I argued that British universities are continuing to operate while steadily losing authority. That remains the uncomfortable feature of the current crisis. The system does not have to implode in order to fail. Campuses remain open, degrees are still awarded, and research is still published. Vice-chancellors still speak confidently about excellence, inclusion and ‘impact’, yet the institution’s authority keeps draining away.

That earlier essay focused on universities and their problems. Grade inflation weakens the degree as a marker of ability, effort and achievement. Student debt raises the cost of the bargain. Generative AI makes it harder to know what assessed work proves. The student-loan system defers political pain rather than resolving it. Universities may survive all this, but survival is not the same as strength.

This essay asks the next question. If that is what is happening to the institutions, what is happening to the people they produce: graduates carrying newly minted credentials?

The public argument about higher education usually stays with the university: fees, funding, admissions, international recruitment, research, free speech, value for money, student loans, vice-chancellors' pay. These are real questions. But they can hide the more important one. What sort of person does the modern university now admit, shape, certify and send back into the country?

The answer has to begin with a caution. British universities produce many impressive graduates. There are students who work hard, read seriously, write clearly, think independently and leave university better formed than when they arrived. There are departments that still teach demanding material with seriousness.

But that is not the same as saying the word 'graduate', the credential, the BSc or BA, tells us enough. Increasingly, it does not.

A university does more than teach. It selects, sorts, socialises, supports, assesses and certifies. It takes in young people – and some older ones – exposes them to a mixture of academic rules, institutional habits, peer expectations, financial anxiety, cultural assumptions and assessment practices, then sends them out under a single label: graduate. That label once had more explanatory power than it does now. It suggested rigorous selection, excellent literacy, capacity for self-organisation and intellectual stamina. It did not prove brilliance, but it meant that a person had passed through a demanding process and emerged with a recognisable and consistent level of competence.

The degree was never a perfect signal. Class, family background, school quality, university prestige and social confidence always distorted it. Employers have always known that a first from one institution was not the same as a first from another. But the signal worked well enough to be useful. A graduate was not merely a person with a certificate. He or she was a claim: this person has been tested in ways that reveal something about ability and character.

That claim is now harder to sustain.

The modern graduate is produced by a mass system, not an elite one. That is not automatically a criticism. Wider access allowed many people to enter higher education who would once have been excluded for reasons of class, geography, money, or expectation rather than ability. That is a serious social achievement. But mass higher education changes the meaning of the output. The word 'graduate' now encompasses far greater variation in prior attainment, academic preparation, resilience, debt burden, support needs, institutional quality, and employment prospects.

The transformation is not only British. The Policy Institute report on European higher education in the 2020s makes the scale clear. In 1938, in advanced economies such as England, France and Germany, only about 2% of young people were enrolled for undergraduate degrees. Today, across Europe and the OECD, around half of young adults are qualified to degree level. One of the great post-war expansions of opportunity has also produced one of the great post-war changes in meaning.

The problem is that the system still speaks as if the label has remained stable. Employers, parents, schools and politicians are still asked to treat the graduate as a reliable output: a signal that means something beyond completion. But the process of producing the graduate has changed.

It indicates that someone completed a course; it might suggest persistence and reflect real achievement. But it increasingly fails to answer the questions an employer, taxpayer, or society might reasonably ask. Can this person write clearly? Can they read difficult material with stamina? Can they work without constant prompting? Can they accept criticism? Can they use AI intelligently rather than merely conveniently? Can they distinguish evidence from assertion? Can they cope with hierarchy, disagreement and ordinary workplace pressure?

The degree should help answer these questions. Too often, it now does but only weakly.

WHAT DOES A DEGREE SIGNIFY?

The problem begins long before the student attends their university, with the admissions process. Oxford, Imperial, Warwick and a low-tariff provider are not drawing from the same

pool of students or sending the same signal to the labour market. The most selective universities still recruit stronger academic profiles than lower-tariff institutions.

More people enter higher education with very varied academic profiles. For many institutions, perhaps the majority, the primary objective is to fill the numbers for their courses. The result is not a uniform collapse of standards. It is greater variation behind the same label.

That matters because a wider entrance gate increases the need for the degree to provide a sharper and more consistent signal. If universities admit a broader and more unevenly prepared cohort, then the classification at the end has to do more work. It must show whether a student has genuinely been transformed, whether the course has added significant value, and whether the graduate now possesses the abilities the term 'degree' implies.

The Office for Students evidence is difficult to dismiss. Students entering with weaker A-level profiles are now much more likely than before to leave with top degrees. Between 2010–11 and 2022–23, the share of students entering with DDD at A-level who received first-class degrees rose from 6.7% to 24.4%. It does not prove that every one of those firsts is undeserved. Some students develop late. Some arrive poorly taught but intellectually capable. Some flourish because university gives them the structure, confidence or subject focus that school did not.

But the number is astonishingly high. When almost a quarter of DDD entrants emerge with first-class degrees, the classification system is being asked to explain a great deal. It has to distinguish genuine transformation from easier marking, changed assessment design, softer classification rules and grade inflation. It has to persuade employers that a first still means something sharp enough to be useful.

At system level, that persuasion is becoming harder. The Office for Students has repeatedly found that the rise in top classifications cannot be fully explained by changes in student characteristics, subject mix or prior attainment. If more students were getting firsts simply because entrants had become much stronger, the story would be easier to celebrate. But that is not the evidence we have. Top classifications have risen faster than the observable changes in the student population can explain.

This is where the widened gate and the weakened signal meet. A broader intake is not itself a problem if the system can still distinguish clearly between different levels of achievement at the end. But if the intake becomes more varied while outcomes cluster at the top, the degree loses information. It still certifies completion. It still confers status. It still matters. But it tells outsiders less about the person carrying it.

A mass system can work. It cannot work honestly if it pretends that mass participation and compressed classification have no effect on what the final label means.

A LARGER AND MORE COMPLICATED STUDENT BODY

The modern university is not only educating more students. It is educating a more 'diverse' population of students.

That word, 'diverse', needs to be handled with care. It has become one of those terms that signals virtue more readily than it explains reality. Let's use the word with less social baggage; 'complicated' is more neutral. It does not mean less intelligent, less worthy, or less capable of serious academic work. It means that the student body now contains a much

larger recorded share of impairment, health conditions, learning differences and support needs than it did a decade ago. That changes the day-to-day way universities work.

The data on student enrolment by disability type, sex and year shows the scale of the change. In 2014/15, students with a known impairment, health condition or learning difference made up about 12% of enrolments. By 2024/25, they made up almost 23%. In plain terms, the recorded disability group has moved from roughly one student in eight to nearly one in four. That is not a marginal change. It is a structural change in the composition of higher education.

The word 'disability' covers very different circumstances. Some students have physical or sensory impairments. Some have long-term medical conditions. Some have learning differences such as dyslexia, dyspraxia or ADHD. Some have social or communication conditions, including autistic spectrum conditions. Some have undefined mental-health conditions. A growing number are recorded as having multiple impairments, health conditions or learning differences.

The largest increases appear not in physical impairment, which remains a relatively small category, but in mental health, learning differences and multiple impairments. Mental-health declarations rose from about 33,500 in 2014/15 to about 119,390 in 2024/25. The category covering multiple impairments, health conditions or learning differences rose from about 21,390 to about 109,960. There is a real argument about what these numbers really measure: greater disclosure, better diagnosis, social contagion, Covid after-effects, or a genuine deterioration in young people's mental health. Almost certainly some mixture of these. Nobody can disentangle it, but everybody knows it’s an imperfect way to classify students' needs.

A sizeable group of students will have spent their school days, then their time at university, classed as disabled or eligible for special support and are now entering the workforce with that label firmly attached. The composition of this group is skewed by gender. Among women students, the share with a known impairment, health condition or learning difference rose from about 13% in 2014/15 to about 26% in 2024/25. Among men, it rose from about 12% to about 19%. Clearly, the student body in higher education is not the one around which older assumptions about university were built.

For the institutions, the implication is practical before it is ideological. A student body in which nearly one in four students has a recorded condition requires more support, more adjustment, more pastoral capacity and more administrative coordination. It also makes assessment harder to design. A system trying to be fair to a student with severe anxiety, a student with dyslexia, a student with a mobility impairment and a student with no declared condition cannot pretend that one traditional assessment model fits all. Nor can it endlessly customise the experience without weakening common standards, although that is what it suggests it does.

Universities are expected to widen access, support complex needs, preserve fairness, maintain standards and produce credentials employers can trust. Each aim may be defensible on its own. Together, they place an impossible strain on institutions already under financial pressure.

The employer then receives the output of that strain. Among employed degree-holders, the level of disability is about 15%. They are being joined by today’s graduates, a quarter of whom are in that category. Now, there are many explanations for this difference. Students may disclose a ‘problem’ more readily than employees, especially where disclosure unlocks

support. But the direction is clear enough. The graduate pipeline now has a higher recorded support profile than the employed graduate workforce.

Some graduates with recorded conditions will be outstanding employees. Some will have developed unusual discipline precisely because they had to work around difficulty. Others may struggle with the transition into ordinary employment. The point is that the degree does not tell the employer which is which.

It does not show whether a student needed extensive support to complete the course, whether that support unlocked genuine capability, whether it masked fragility, whether the graduate will thrive with the right adjustment, or whether work will expose difficulties that the university had been containing. The credential remains the same; the level of support, resilience and readiness behind it does not.

PROFITING FROM A DEGREE HAS BECOME A GAMBLE

Taking a degree has become a financial wager at the very moment when confidence in the reward has weakened.

At the average level, graduates still do better in the labour market than non-graduates. They are more likely to be employed, more likely to work in higher-skilled occupations, and more likely to earn more over their lifetimes. The graduate premium has not disappeared.

But averages are increasingly poor guides to lived reality. The graduate premium varies sharply by subject, institution, region, family background, prior attainment and labour-market timing. A medical degree from a selective university and a generic course from a struggling provider do not carry the same economic value. Yet both are often sold under the same broad social story: go to university, get a degree, improve your prospects.

The European evidence points in the same direction. The Policy Institute report argues that it is increasingly hard to believe that simply increasing the number of graduates will continue to produce higher salaries and stronger growth. If labour-market demand does not automatically expand to absorb the supply of graduates, the average premium shrinks. The report also notes that growing numbers of graduates already work in jobs where there is no obvious need for graduate skills, while many earn less than people in skilled non-graduate trades.

The old reassurance was that students could protect themselves by choosing the right degree. If the humanities looked risky, the answer was to study something technical. Learn to code. Choose computer science. Move closer to the economy of the future.

That reassurance is now less secure than it looked. The Economist has analysed American graduate outcomes and found that recent graduates in fields most exposed to AI have suffered much worse employment outcomes since the arrival of AI. Between 2022 and 2024, graduates in the least AI-exposed subjects saw their full-time employment rate fall by only 1.5%. In the most exposed subjects – including computer science, computer engineering and information science – the fall was 6.6%. Updated figures from 13 universities suggested the trend continued into the class of 2025, with full-time employment in the most exposed fields falling from nearly 70% to 55% in three years.

This is not proof that AI alone caused the fall; maybe it was the over-recruiting post-Covid or a downturn in the economy. The same article notes that some economists find deterioration in AI-exposed occupations, while others argue that the decline in job postings

began before ChatGPT and has affected both senior and junior workers. But for students deciding whether to take on a large debt, the practical distinction may matter less than it does to economists. The signal is already there. The supposedly safe route is no longer obviously safe.

That is what makes the timing so damaging. The degree is becoming more expensive just as the early-career labour market is becoming less predictable. A student can still make a sensible choice and still discover that the market has moved underneath them. Worse, the subjects once associated with employability may be among the first to feel the pressure of AI. The disturbing possibility is not simply that weak degrees are weakening. It is that some of the degrees students were told would protect them may be exposed first.

The change is already feeding back into student behaviour. The Economist reports that undergraduate enrolment in computer science fell by 11% in 2025, while enrolment in computer programming fell by 26%. That does not mean students have stopped valuing technical skill. It means they are beginning to suspect that a narrow coding credential may not offer the insurance it once seemed to promise. The graduate premium has not disappeared, but it is becoming more conditional, more uneven and more vulnerable to technological change. Another unreported issue concerns students studying business studies and management, the most popular course today, where average earnings five years after graduation are lower than for nursing graduates, according to FT analysis of official graduate-outcomes data.

This is all a very different proposition from the one students were sold. Yet for those who cared to look, the warning signs were clearly visible. Over a decade ago, the Institute for Fiscal Studies found substantial variation in returns by subject and institution. The high number of graduates working in jobs that do not require a degree is not new. What is changing is the political and psychological setting in which the bargain is now being judged. Many recent graduates claim that 'nobody told me of the risks'. That's not strictly true; they didn't look for the readily available evidence.

In England, the average borrower who finished their course in 2024 owed about £53,000 when first liable to repay. That figure does not mean all graduates repay that amount; many will not. Income-contingent repayment means the balance often works less like a normal debt and more like a long-running graduate tax. Technically, that distinction matters. Psychologically, the headline number still matters.

England is unusual in Europe. The Policy Institute report describes England as an outlier because of its heavy reliance on student fees, overt competition between institutions and detailed earnings data by subject and provider. Other European systems face similar doubts about mass higher education, but England attaches those doubts more directly to individual debt. That gives the issue its particular political force.

The student is no longer simply acquiring an education. He or she is taking on a huge financial commitment in the hope that the labour market will eventually justify it, a hope that is becoming harder to sustain. Graduate vacancies have fallen; entry-level roles are being squeezed by weak growth, employer caution, and the arrival of AI into the kinds of junior work graduates once used to prove themselves. The first rung of the ladder matters more than policy language usually admits. If that rung weakens, the expected benefits of attending university collapse.

This is where student debt becomes more than a line in the public accounts. It affects

expectation. A student carrying a large loan into a weaker job market may not experience university as an opportunity for advancement or a time of coming of age. It can feel like a gamble that now has to be won.

That pressure feeds back into student life before graduation. HEPI's student experience evidence shows how far paid work has become part of the ordinary student experience. In 2025, 68% of students undertook paid work during term time. Independent study time fell from 13.6 hours a week in 2024 to 11.6 in 2025. Only 37% regarded their course as good value for money, while 29% saw it as poor value.

These numbers describe a different university from the one still held in public memory. The old image was immersive, fun, a time to expand the mind and come of age. The university removed students from ordinary life for a period of concentrated academic and social formation. It gave them time to read, argue, experiment, fail, recover and grow. That image was always truer for some students than for others, but it had enough truth to shape the cultural idea of higher education.

Today, the graduate is not just a person with a credential; their outlook is shaped by debt, cost pressures, weaker early-career certainty, and a more conditional belief in the promise that sent them to university.

CAUGHT BETWEEN POLICING AI AND EXPLOITING IT

Students graduating over the next few years have passed through university during the awkward middle stage of AI's arrival. The technology has become powerful enough to change how intellectual work is produced, but universities have not yet fully adapted their teaching or assessment to it.

That is not the students' fault. It is a timing problem. Generative AI arrived too quickly for institutions to absorb. Universities change slowly. Built around committees, assessment rules, academic caution and minimising reputational risk, they responded as one would expect. They tried to stop cheating, protect the assessment and preserve the value of the degree. That instinct was understandable. A credential that cannot distinguish between a student's own capability and the convenient output of a machine is plainly unreliable.

But the labour market is moving in a different direction at speed. Employers increasingly expect graduates to be more than AI literate; they expect them to be fluent, confident and discriminating users of the technology. That creates a mismatch. Universities are still partly in the age of policing AI use, while employers are beginning to expect AI fluency. A student may spend three years being warned about misuse, only to enter a workplace where intelligent use is assumed.

The issue is not whether students should be allowed to use AI to evade work. If a student submits machine-generated output in place of thought, the assessment has been corrupted. If the degree certifies writing, judgement, knowledge and analysis that the student has not demonstrated, the credential is weakened further.

But the opposite response is also failing. Treating AI mainly as a threat to be contained risks preparing students for a world that no longer exists. Employers want people who can use AI to gather first-pass information, test an argument, compare options, identify weak assumptions, draft efficiently, interrogate output, check sources, spot patterns and decide when the machine is wrong. That is not cheating. It is becoming part of competent work.

The AI problem is therefore deeper than plagiarism. Cheating is only the surface. The larger issue is whether universities can still define, teach and assess intellectual competence when many visible behaviours once associated with competence can now be produced by software. A student can generate a fluent paragraph, plausible summary, tidy argument, coding solution or business plan without necessarily possessing the knowledge or judgement those outputs imply.

That does not make intelligence obsolete. It makes judgement more important, but judgement is harder to assess than output.

Those currently at university, and those just leaving it, have passed through institutions still trying to discover the rules. Some courses ban AI. Some tolerate it. Some encourage it. Some academics use it well. Others barely understand it. Some assessments are redesigned around process, oral defence and reflection. Others remain vulnerable to outsourcing. The result is uneven not only between universities, but between departments, modules and individual tutors.

The problem is no longer hypothetical. The Wall Street Journal reported research by Igor Chirikov at UC Berkeley, based on more than half a million grades from a large public university in Texas between 2018 and 2025. The study compared courses heavily exposed to AI – especially those involving writing and coding – with courses less dependent on such work. Before ChatGPT, there was little difference between the two groups. After its arrival, A grades rose much more sharply in the AI-exposed courses. Professors in those classes awarded about 30% more A grades, with fewer A-minus and B-plus grades.

The point is not that every student cheated or that every grade became meaningless. It is subtler and more damaging than that. A grade now carries more uncertainty. It may reflect ability, effort and learning. It may also reflect access to better AI, greater confidence in using it, or an assessment regime that has not adapted fast enough. This creates a significant problem for employers.

At a time when entry-level recruitment is becoming more competitive and some employers are again turning to Grade Point Average (GPA) to filter large applicant pools, the grade itself may be becoming less reliable as a signal. According to the same article, employer use of GPA in hiring rose from 37% in 2023 to 42%, while nearly a quarter of entry-level job postings on Handshake that ask for GPA now require a 3.5 or higher, up from 9% in 2020.

This leaves the current graduate in an awkward position. Employers want evidence of competence. Universities still issue grades as if their meaning is stable. But AI has entered the space between work done, work submitted and work assessed. The graduate transcript may still look precise, but the precision is increasingly deceptive. It tells the employer that a student received an A. It does not necessarily tell the employer how much of that A belongs to the student, how much belongs to the tool, and how much belongs to a university assessment system designed for a different technological age.

The employer looking at a recent graduate, therefore, cannot easily know what the degree says about AI-era capability.

The Policy Institute report notes that universities are now expected to address major societal challenges, including artificial intelligence, and to prepare students for a rapidly changing labour market. It says this requires graduates who can think critically, collaborate with different partners, show curiosity and develop a more entrepreneurial mindset. That is a

far more demanding expectation than the old assumption that a degree itself was enough to certify readiness.

AI sharpens the central question. What does the graduate label prove? It may prove that someone completed a course during the most disruptive technological shift in modern knowledge work. In the best cases, it may prove that the student learned to combine human judgement with machine assistance. Equally, it may show only that the student passed through a system whose assessments were designed for one age while the tools available to students belonged to another.

This matters especially for entry-level work. Much junior graduate employment has traditionally involved tasks that were partly educational in themselves: drafting, summarising, searching, checking, compiling background material, preparing notes, producing first-pass analysis. These jobs gave graduates a way to become useful while learning how organisations worked. AI now undertakes much of this layer of work. If employers automate or compress it, graduates lose some of the tasks through which they once proved themselves.

That is the transitional graduate: formed in institutions still policing AI as a threat while the labour market begins to treat it as a basic tool.

THE CAMPUS CULTURAL ENVIRONMENT

The modern graduate does not leave university carrying only a qualification. He or she also leaves after spending several formative years in a distinctive cultural environment.

This point needs handling carefully. Students have always had politics. Universities have always leaned younger, more liberal and more impatient with inherited assumptions than the society around them. That is not new. It is part of what universities are for. A university that never unsettled its students, never exposed them to new ideas and never encouraged them to question authority would not be much of a university.

Nor should this become a crude complaint about young people being 'woke'. That word now does too much work and explains too little. It turns a real issue into a slogan. The better question is not whether graduates have been indoctrinated, but whether universities have become culturally narrower at the same moment that employers and society need graduates who can operate across disagreement.

A university teaches more than course content. Students learn what is admired, what is mocked, what is risky to say, what wins approval, what attracts suspicion and which opinions can be held openly. Much of this education is informal, occurring through peer culture, student politics, institutional messaging, staff assumptions, training modules, seminar atmospheres, campaign language, and the quiet social pressure to belong.

That hidden curriculum matters because it helps form the graduate's views and expectations of the world outside.

Over the last decade, universities have placed increasing emphasis on identity, inclusion, harm, safety, wellbeing, belonging, decolonisation, diversity and lived experience. Institutions that once assumed a narrow type of student have had to deal with a wider and more varied population. Students who were once ignored or excluded have become more visible. Universities have had to think harder about disability, race, gender, sexuality, mental health, class and belonging. There is no serious route back to pretending those issues do not exist.

But the language of inclusion can also create a restrictive and threatening environment. It

can shape how disagreement is understood. It can teach students to read discomfort as harm, opposition as hostility, inequality as proof of institutional failure, and speech as something requiring management. It can encourage a habit in which difficult ideas are not first tested, but morally classified. It can stop students from expressing their views, fearing they are outside the accepted norms.

This is all dangerous for intellectual life. It is also difficult for employers. The workplace is not a seminar room, a student union meeting or a university wellbeing framework. It is a place of hierarchy, compromise, commercial pressure, imperfect managers, awkward colleagues, conflicting incentives and necessary disagreement. Not every decision can be made participatively. Not every discomfort can be removed. Not every criticism is a personal attack. Not every gap between expectation and reality is evidence of injustice.

A graduate who understands that will adapt. A graduate who does not will fail.

The timing makes the problem sharper. Many students now leaving university have spent their undergraduate years in institutions where diversity, equity and inclusion remained central to institutional language and culture. At the same time, parts of the corporate world, especially in the United States, have begun to retreat from more expansive forms of DEI. The public sector and universities may move more slowly, but employers exposed to commercial, legal and political pressure are becoming more cautious.

That creates another mismatch. Graduates may enter the workforce having been formed in an environment where DEI language is treated as normal, morally authoritative, and institutionally endorsed, only to encounter workplaces that are becoming more guarded, more pragmatic, or more openly sceptical. The graduate may expect the workplace to continue using the university's moral vocabulary. The employer may expect the graduate to leave that vocabulary behind, or at least subordinate it to performance, teamwork and organisational purpose.

Neither side may fully understand the other.

This does not mean employers want graduates without values. Good employers need judgement, empathy, fairness and the ability to work with people unlike themselves. Nor does it mean universities are wrong to care about inclusion. The issue is whether the balance has shifted from moral formation to moral narrowing.

Teaching students to recognise complexity is not the same as teaching them to sort the world into approved and suspect categories. Encouraging kindness should not mean encouraging fragility. Making room for disagreement is different from training students to treat disagreement as injury. Widening access to the conversation loses its purpose if the range of what can safely be said inside it begins to shrink.

Professor Nigel Biggar’s argument sharpens the point by shifting attention from what universities say they protect to what they may be failing to produce. His standard is a liberal academic culture in which people can say what they believe to be true, hear what others believe to be true, and test those claims through argument. That requires more than formal free-speech protections. It requires intellectual habits: courage, patience, self-command, fairness, curiosity and a willingness to hear disturbing views without immediately treating them as threats.

Biggar’s complaint is that these habits are not being reliably cultivated. Too often, in his account, universities reward caution over courage, moral positioning over careful inquiry, and silence over dissent. That matters for the question of what a graduate now proves. If

Biggar is right, the graduate may leave university not enlarged by disagreement, but trained to avoid it, manage it or police it. The credential may show that a student completed a course. It does not show whether the university made that student braver, fairer, more truthful or more capable of thinking under pressure.

Universities should be among the places where young people learn that the world is more complicated than their peer group thinks. Too often, they are places where peer culture is amplified by institutional caution.

The best graduates will emerge from academia with wider sympathy, sharper moral seriousness, and the ability to challenge lazy assumptions without becoming trapped in new ones. The weaker graduate may leave with something else: a vocabulary of critique without the discipline of judgement. The trouble is that GPA scores do not distinguish which is which.

EMPLOYERS LOOK FOR PROOF BEYOND THE DEGREE

Employers never believed that every graduate was brilliant, but they did assume that selection into university, survival inside it, assessment by academics and final classification together provided a usable signal of intelligence. The degree stood in for a bundle of qualities that were difficult to test directly: literacy, persistence, punctuality, self-organisation, social confidence, teachability, ambition and the ability to cope with sustained intellectual demand.

Today's graduate carries a credential that explains less. It does not reliably distinguish high achievement from modest achievement, nor does it show how much support was required along the way. It does not reveal whether the student was formed by demanding instruction or by a thinner, more transactional learning experience. In an age of AI, it no longer demonstrates independent writing as confidently as it once did, and it says little, if anything, about whether the graduate can think under pressure, accept criticism, exercise judgement, or work within ordinary institutional constraints.

The degree still tells the employer something, but not enough. Employers who continue to treat it as a simple proxy for capability are taking a gamble. Some strong candidates will be missed because they lack the expected polish or institutional status, while some weaker candidates will be overvalued because their credentials come from a high-status institution. Some graduates who look ordinary on paper may have acquired exactly the discipline employers need by studying while working, caring, commuting or overcoming difficulty; others may have been carried through an accommodating system without developing the habits that work requires.

This is why employers increasingly talk about skills. The language is often clumsy and fashionable, but the impulse behind it is rational. If the degree no longer provides enough information, employers have to look for more direct evidence of ability. They need to know whether a candidate can write, analyse, use numbers, speak clearly, work with others, solve practical problems, use AI without being fooled by it, learn quickly and be trusted with responsibility. These are not abstract questions. They are the questions the degree once helped to answer.

A more sceptical employer will therefore test more directly, using work samples, writing exercises, structured interviews, assessment centres, probationary periods, internships,

apprenticeships, technical tests and practical tasks. It may still recruit graduates, but it will believe the label less readily. It will want proof.

That is not necessarily a bad development and might even be fairer. A system that tests actual ability can open routes for bright non-graduates, apprentices, self-taught coders, mature entrants and independent learners. It can also weaken the lazy snobbery by which employers once used institutional prestige as a substitute for thought.

But it is still a warning to universities. If employers must construct their own tests because the degree has become less informative, then part of the university's economic function has been lost. The institution still sells certification, but the buyer no longer fully trusts its value.

Employers often want work-ready young people without investing enough in training them. They romanticise the qualities of older graduates and forget how inexperienced they themselves once were. They may blame universities for problems caused by weak management, low wages, poor onboarding or unrealistic expectations. But employer complaints cannot be dismissed when they repeatedly say graduates lack resilience, communication, initiative or basic workplace habits.

This is not a new problem. More than a decade ago, the National Centre for Universities and Business was warning that the word 'graduate' was being asked to cover too wide a range of ability, achievement and labour market value. The newer pressures have not created that doubt; they have intensified it.

Universities should not become training departments for corporate HR. Their purpose is wider than first employment. But refusing crude employability is not the same as ignoring employability altogether. If universities ask students to take on large debts partly on the promise of improved prospects, they cannot treat employer doubt as vulgar or irrelevant. The degree must mean something outside the university, not only inside it.

The value of the graduate is therefore not only weakening but fragmenting. Mass higher education widened access, but hierarchy has not disappeared. A strong graduate from a demanding institution, with work experience, AI fluency and a clear subject return, does not enter the labour market in the same position as a graduate from a weaker institution, even though both may carry high debt and little professional proof. The single label hides differences that employers, parents, and students already know exist.

RESTORING MEANING TO THE GRADUATE DEGREE

The answer is not to abolish universities or restore the old elite system. The harder question is: what would give the graduate credential more meaning?

A more honest system would begin by admitting that the word 'graduate' is no longer enough. The degree should be supplemented by clearer evidence of what was actually studied, tested and demonstrated. How much writing was required? How much quantitative work? How much independent research? How much group work? How much AI use was permitted, required or prohibited? What was assessed under controlled conditions and what was assessed over time?

At present, too much is hidden behind the smooth surface of the award. A first may conceal very different levels of difficulty. A 2:1 may represent serious achievement in a

demanding course or modest achievement in a softer one. Some assessments may be rigorous. Others may be convenient. The label alone does not tell us which.

A more useful signal would be closer to a capability record: evidence of writing, reasoning, numeracy, subject knowledge, practical competence, AI literacy, collaboration, independence and resilience under assessment. Not as slogans in a prospectus, but as demonstrated outputs. That would help strong graduates most. It would also help students from less prestigious institutions who have genuinely developed but lack brand power. It would expose weaker courses and weaker claims. That is why it would be resisted.

AI makes this unavoidable. Sometimes a student should be assessed without AI, because there remains value in knowing whether someone can read, think, calculate, argue and write unaided. At other times the student should be assessed with AI, because the workplace will expect them to use it. But then the assessment must test judgement: the ability to challenge output, check sources, recognise false confidence and decide when the machine is unsuitable.

The same principle applies to the extra support a quarter of students receive. A fair university must make reasonable adjustments for students with disabilities, health conditions and learning differences; however, it must also preserve the meaning of achievement. Support should enable capability, not disguise its absence.

Universities must be honest with students and stop pretending that the degree guarantees employability. The brutal fact is that the combination of institutional reputation and course choice may confer little material advantage beyond the experience of gaining the credential itself. A degree may still be valuable, but its value can no longer be assumed. It has to be demonstrated – to the student, to the employer and to everyone still being asked to trust what the word ‘graduate’ means.