

# The UK government must ensure core subjects are taught in every region

A national curriculum relating to vital knowledge and skills could also help assure equal access to high-quality courses, says Ian Pace

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The wisdom of what has been called the UK's "[boarding school](#)" model of higher education is regularly questioned. In a [parliamentary debate](#) in 2010, for instance, former Conservative MP Tony Baldry suggested that it would be more cost-effective for mature students to study as close as possible to their own home. The then business secretary, Vince Cable, expressed the broader view that "we could move to a more sensible system whereby many students study in their home town".

Meanwhile, in David Lodge's 1988 novel *Nice Work*, factory manager Vic Wilcox expresses disdain for the lavish student accommodation that he sees, believing that most students "could live at home and go to their local colleges. Like I did". In response, academic Robyn Penrose retorts that "leaving home is part of the experience of going to university" – though not necessarily of going to polytechnics, which Robyn views as "cheap and nasty".

Lodge was writing at a time when less than 20 per cent of school-leavers were entering higher education and undergraduates still received a maintenance grant. By the time of Cable's interventions, the proportion going into higher education was [approaching 50 per cent](#). Moreover, in 2020-21, 46 per cent of new students (excepting those going to for-profit providers) enrolled at post-1992 institutions, formerly the polytechnics despised by Penrose. Fees had been in place for over a decade and Cable allowed their trebling to a maximum of £9,000 per annum from 2012-13.

Consequently, student accommodation has become big business, largely taken over by private providers (accounting for [77 per cent](#) of new student beds in 2018). The fees they charge are significantly more than was almost ever the case when I was a student in the mid-1980s (before rent controls were abolished in 1989). The levels of debts that students incur as a result are becoming larger and larger – especially during a cost-of-living crisis.

Given that abolishing fees is unlikely to be on the political agenda of the major UK parties at present given the cost implications, I recognise Cable and others' reasons for wishing to consider a more localised model of higher education. Currently, only around [20-25 per cent of students](#) live at their parental homes. While that situation is far from ideal in various respects, an increase in that proportion would avoid some student debt – as it does in [many European countries](#).

Obviously, some students do not have this option. Some parents would charge them, some parental residences are not safe places for them, and so on. It would be imperative that the maximum support were given to all such students so they were not at a disadvantage when it comes to choosing to enter higher education.

But there are wider potential problems, too, regarding the availability of institutions and courses. While most students living in or around some major cities have a wide range of choices, this is by no means always the case in other parts of the country. In my subject, music, the only major offering south-west of the University of Bristol and Bath Spa University is at University College Falmouth. Alternative options amount to a much smaller and limited department at the University of Plymouth and a few private providers. Unless they lived relatively close to Falmouth, it would be difficult for a commuter student in the South-West (an area poorly served for public transport) to consider studying music in a major department at all.

With this in mind, more radical solutions should be considered. First, the government should require that a range of core subjects be made available by at least one university within any area of a particular size and population, regardless of recruitment numbers. These subjects should include well-established disciplines: the major sciences, engineering, computing, literature, languages, history, geography, music, and others. Determining the areas relative to population would not be easy, especially in sparsely populated regions, but extra provision of subsidised transport dedicated to students could help here.

My second, and possibly more contentious, proposal is that all higher education institutions should be required to implement some type of tertiary national curriculum. These should encompass a range of core modules relating to vital knowledge and skills, which would need to be determined for each subject but, at least in the case of arts and humanities, should encompass some degree of historical and geographical breadth and should entail some critical thinking and reflection on the nature and history of the discipline. Such modules could be devised as a more rigorous expansion of the Quality Assurance Agency's subject benchmarks.

If properly thought through, this move would make it easier for more students to live at the parental home and still be able to access a wide range of subjects, with more robust guarantees of actual content than currently exist. It could mitigate against a race to the bottom in terms of content, so that neither vital but challenging core modules nor intellectual rigour were sacrificed in the name of student satisfaction. And it would diminish, at least to some extent, the destructive model of universities as competitors.

What would be compromised in the process is some degree of institutional autonomy. But if it led to increased participation in higher education, this may be a price worth paying.