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To the Right Honourable David Willetts,

Open Letter from the Council for College and University English

As University teachers of English, we urge you to reconsider your proposals for the withdrawal of public funding for the teaching of the Humanities and Social Sciences.

We are deeply concerned both by the rapidity with which decisions are being made, and the ill-considered assumptions that underlie the proposals. According to the Browne report, just fifty hours of panel time have been devoted to ‘scrutinising the evidence, examining the options for reform and testing the recommendations’. A week, or slightly more, to remodel the entire basis of teaching in Britain’s Universities?

It is not clear to us that the market alone is an effective way of managing higher education; nor does it appear that any serious work has been done to predict the ways in which the proposed changes to that market will affect Higher Education institutions and the national and regional economies across the UK. The proposals are based upon assumptions about the different levels of economic and social utility of subjects in the Arts and Humanities on the one hand and those in the so called STEM area on the other. But the evidence of the last fifty years of Higher Education has demonstrated clearly that the skills, experiences and ideas that ‘non- priority’ subjects such as English provide are as fundamental to business as they are to the public sector. Society will be poorer for a lack of public investment in the arts and humanities; but business will be too.

Across a wide range of sectors graduates in English bring immense value to UK culture and the UK economy, making use of the rigorous critical training and advanced communication skills provided by University departments.

How can it make sense – in economic or any other terms – to withdraw public support from the teaching of subjects such as English in our Universities, with no serious analysis of either the assumptions guiding the decisions or their likely effects?

Professor Linda Anderson
on behalf of Council for College and University English

