

Review of Degree Course Descriptions 2010/2011

Edited by John Mainstone and Ken Reynolds

Like lots of advisers all over the UK I sat the other day in front of a young student looking perplexed. He had Architecture down on his UCAS form. He was concerned about his personal statement. I was concerned about his personal statement. In fact he had no idea what an Architecture degree consisted of. No idea of the core parts of the degree, or what was involved in this seven year adventure. I asked him tentatively “if I said I was going to send you away to another country for seven years with no idea where you were headed would you go?” “I might” he said.

This is why a book as comprehensive as “Degree course descriptions” needs to exist. The higher education sector is under more pressure than ever before. Rightly parents and prospective students are questioning the value of degrees. Following the Browne review, tuition fees will rise to £6,000-£9000 a year and possibly higher as universities are given the freedom. This coupled with reduced university places and ever increasing A-level grades, falling graduate salaries and record graduate unemployment put intense pressure on the system.

The pressure is most acute on the prospective student to get it right. Mistakes are costly, not just financially if you drop out of a course, or don’t do well. The impact on the student is misery and disappointment, missed chances and waste. This waste for the government alone amounts to a cost of £1 billion over seven years as it seeks to reduce 1 in 4 students dropping out. In addition over 5% switch to a different course.

“Degree Course Descriptions” seeks to tackle the really important questions. What will I be studying and what will I be able to do with it. It isn’t obvious. There are over 50,000 degree courses available in the UK, covering 750 subjects. Increasingly courses sound vocational but might not always provide exemption required by professional bodies. There are degrees in increasingly important areas such as Energy Engineering. Many degrees that are vocational require work experience as standard, and require the applicant to tie in what they will be studying in their degree with their present academic subjects and extra curricular activities on their personal statement. None of this is possible if the student is not sure what they are applying for.

Degree Course Descriptions explains over 120 degree courses. The book is sensibly laid out with nine initial chapters covering general topics including how to apply online, budgeting and gap year considerations. There is an excellent topic in this section on choosing a higher education course which succinctly runs through the different degree options even including studying abroad. There is also a self-select topic which is a list of 10 factors to take into account when researching your degree options – a sort of structured guide. It goes through aspects such as employment prospects, finance, status, location and crucially time; how long are you prepared to spend in higher education. Other useful parts of this section are subject specific advice on applying to Medicine and applying for Art and Design which require a little more personal awareness.

For each description, information is arranged into an introductory overview of the course area, details of a typical course structure, information on potential career opportunities, suggestions for further reading and web links to sources for more detailed information. It is fully revised and adjusted so this means the courses information is accurate and can be trusted.

It explains specific information in a very concise way that could alter which institutions or subjects a student applies to. For example one institution considered by a student I was seeing in degree course descriptions was highlighted as not yet having the new degree course approved for registration. This enabled my student to check with the institution before they applied.

Other vital information provided is about sandwich or years out in industry and also details on career opportunities; which areas are expanding or retracting. It also warns the reader of the dangers of degree titles for example what might be called Computer Science at one university might not have the same content at another. It gives tips also to warn students for example to check carefully the mix between theory and practical application. This can be vital in sustaining and enjoying a given course. Also the information on the destination of graduates taking a certain degree course is extremely valuable when thinking about future employability.

There is a section on related degrees so that the reader can look at other courses to compare. The websites listed at the bottom of each subject description enable the reader to quickly go to key sites of national associations and professional bodies which, as an adviser, is particularly useful.

Degree Course Descriptions offers any prospective higher education student, adviser, parent or teacher concise, transparent, and effective information on degree course choices. It offers the chance to make the right decision first time around. It is different because the information in it is credible. Each description refers to articles written by professors and lecturers at UK Universities who really know their subject and it shows in the detail. It is the kind of detail, often missed, that leads to individual success. This is surely priceless.

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