

Humanities: the unexpected success story of the twenty-first century

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Humanities within universities faced challenges in the latter half of the twentieth century as their value in the modern world was questioned. This paper argues that there is strong potential for the humanities to thrive in the twenty-first century university sector. It outlines some of the managerial implications necessary to ensure that this potential is delivered. Study of humanities provides an education offering skills to tackle the problems facing the twenty-first century world. The importance of clear communication of the value of the humanities to different constituencies, especially policy makers, institutional governing bodies and prospective students is emphasised.

Keywords: humanities; universities; student choice

The title of this paper may be seen as over-optimistic in the current world of British higher education in which the dominant theme is uncertainty about the future. The recent changes emphasising the role of the market economy within the world of higher education have led to extensive discussions, lectures, conferences and debates on the idea of what a university is and its role in contemporary society, both in Britain and elsewhere in Europe and the US (Anderson 2010; Collini 2012; Delbanco 2011; Donoghue 2010; Fludernik 2005; Harpman 2005; Hoston 2011; Menand 2010; Menand 2010; Hotson 2011); The twenty-first century university is facing a range of challenges. These include, in Britain, a declining population of 18-year-olds; a Treasury Comprehensive Spending Review that imposed cuts in public expenditure of 25% across the board which in higher education translated into a cut of 40%; institutions on the threshold of charging fees up to £9000 a year to undergraduates, ensuring that the next generation of students acquire a significant burden of debt; a conceptualisation articulated in the Browne Review (2010) of a university education being an essentially a private rather than a public good; an economy in the doldrums with widespread and un- and under-employment.

The reason for optimism is that the arguments for the humanities being put forward by academics, subject associations and research councils over recent decades have gained significant ground in defining their importance in both education and in society more widely. Nowhere can this be seen more clearly than in the area of the creative industries and the cultural sector, whose contribution to the UK economy can be effectively demonstrated. This is now recognised by policy makers. The higher education sector in the UK is a hugely diverse one with a wide range of institutions, groups of which face differing challenges

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depending on their stated missions and their individual institutional balance between research, teaching and external engagement. In addition, the blanket description of ‘humanities’ span a range of individual subject areas, some of which – for example, modern languages – face greater challenges than others in recruiting students. The attraction of the humanities, however, is widespread; the success of the Open University in attracting non-traditional, distance learning students to its humanities courses and of Birkbeck, University of London, teaching both full-time and part-time students in the evenings is evidence of this. The strategic plans of individual institutions may be conceptualised and formulated in positioning themselves in ways that mean that individual institutions may choose not to preserve a humanities offering to their students. However, there is strong potential for the humanities to thrive in the twenty-first century university sector overall. This paper will explain why this is so and then outline some of the managerial implications necessary to ensure that its potential is delivered.

Looking at the situation of humanities in universities since the second world war, a number of trends can be identified which neither favoured nor promoted the humanities, although historically they had lain at the core of a liberal university education as defined in the nineteenth century by men such as John Henry Newman in his *Discourses*. After the second world war and during the cold war, when science and defence projects were seen as crucial for national survival and success, the national importance of humanities subjects was somewhat sidelined. Harold Wilson’s often misquoted ‘White Heat of Technology speech’ at the Labour Party conference in 1963 emphasised that a new Britain would be forged in the heat of the scientific and technological revolution (Edgerton 1996, 2005). In the same year, a significant part of the remit for the Robbins Committee on Higher Education was to make the sciences more attractive to potential students (Robbins 1963).

One impact of an emphasis on science in policy making was to drive the humanities to the margins of policy debates of national relevance, leaving humanities subjects perceived as somewhat dilettante activities. The growing importance of economists in government thinking and policy development from the 1960s onwards also detracted from a focus on the humanities. Lionel Robbins, Harold Wilson and Tony Crosland [Secretary of State for Education and Science (1965–67)] were all economists. In the last third of the twentieth century, increasing numbers of economists were being recruited to the civil service (Bate 2011b), with a concomitant effect on government policy towards the higher education sector. This goes some way to explain the attitude of Whitehall towards the relationship between universities and national economic success. To add to the picture, during the era of high modernism in the humanities during the 1950s and 1960s, in which there was a prevalent view that the arts were valuable for their own sake, and into the post-modernist period in the late twentieth century, scholars in humanities did not feel the need to defend themselves. It was felt that their value to those who were studying them and researching them was self-evident. Any justification was seen as a sort of academic prostitution which imperilled the purity of the disciplines, undermining critical reflection on human values and principles. Such views have not entirely disappeared: see, for example, the article by literary critic Terry Eagleton who argued in *The Guardian* in December 2010 that academia had become a servant of the status quo and thus had lost its ability to challenge that status quo ‘in the name of justice, tradition, imagination, human welfare, the free play of the mind or alternative visions of the future’ (Eagleton 2010).

What has changed over the last quarter century – and most intensively over the last decade – is that the humanities community led in the UK by the British Academy has been proactive in arguing for the value of the humanities with considerable success (AHRC 2009;

Bate 2011a; British Academy, 2004, 2008, 2010; LSE Public Policy Group 2008). The result has been that a new understanding of the national and international importance of the humanities has emerged. It is on this understanding that universities will need to build when managing the success of the humanities in the decades ahead. A key development which brought additional leadership to the sector was the development of a research council for the Humanities between 1997 and 2005 (Conisbee 2008; Herbert 2008).

Prior to 1994, the Humanities, unlike other research areas, did not have any national body responsible for providing either research support or postgraduate training. The decade 1994–2004 was the key period during which the value of humanities research began to be acknowledged by the award of government funding. In 1994, the British Academy used its own funds to launch an Arts and Humanities Research Board. Subsequently, the 1997 Dearing Report recommended the development of an Arts and Humanities Research Board – less prestigious than a full research council – which was established in 1998 by the three higher education funding councils for England, Scotland and Wales, the Department for Employment and Learning and the British Academy (Dearing 1997). A 2002 government review of research funding in the arts and humanities recommended the establishment of a UK-wide Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC) should be created; an initiative which was reinforced by the white paper on *The Future of Higher Education* (DES 2003). The AHRC was launched in 2005 and the establishment of this Research Council for the Humanities ensured that research funding in the humanities of £98 million per annum was ring-fenced alongside the funding for other research councils in the 2010 Comprehensive Spending Review.

Recent speeches in 2010–2012 from David Willetts, Minister, provide more evidence of this emerging understanding of the value of humanities research

Then again, I was recently at a meeting to discuss the contribution of our research to international development. We can be very proud that drugs emerging from research funded by the Medical Research Council tackle the diseases of the developing world. But then the medical researchers said that discovering the drug was not the end of the process. One problem they had encountered was that, in some developing countries, people were very wary of drugs or vaccinations promoted by Westerners and even feared they were a plot to damage their health. The medics needed to understand where these beliefs came from and how they spread. That meant learning from research on local cultures, the dissemination of rumour, and attitudes to medicine. Almost every really big issue needs to be looked at from the perspective of different disciplines. That is why humanities and social sciences are quite rightly at the heart of contemporary enquiry. (Willetts 2011)

I'm all in favour of curiosity-driven research whose applications may take time to emerge, if at all. Intellectual enquiry is worthwhile for its own sake – whether it's devoted to engineering or to Shakespeare. This university's [Birmingham] excellence in Shakespeare studies has probably contributed to the tourism industry, as so many lovers of Shakespeare come here from around the world. But boosting the tourism industry is not what inspires an academic to study Shakespeare. Too often, politicians have taken the economic value which flows from much academic research and then treated it as the only possible motive for the research. I am not going to make that mistake. (Willetts, Birmingham speech May 2010)

This broad research base emphatically includes the arts, humanities and social sciences. They are all part of the science and research ring fence. Increasingly for example research in the physical sciences is linked to human behaviour – not just designing a low carbon vehicle but understanding what makes people choose to drive it – or not. In allocating research funding I have therefore followed the advice of the learned societies and others that we should not shift the balance of funding between the main disciplines ... I like the idea that instead of just thinking about Science, Technology, Engineering, and Maths (STEM), we should add the Arts so it becomes STEAM. (Willetts, Policy Exchange speech January 2012)

The same recognition of the value of humanities and the social sciences was reflected in a speech by Marie Geoghegan-Quinn, European Union Commissioner for Research, Innovation and Science at the British Academy in November 2011 in which she focused on the role to be played by both the social sciences and humanities in the new European Union Horizon 2020 funding programme.

In the current context of the deep economic crisis and of constant transformation in our economy and society, the Social Sciences and Humanities help us to address the most fundamental economic, social, political and cultural issues. The challenges we face are fundamentally social and human in nature – they are the result of individual and collective human behaviour. They are intrinsically linked to how we behave. The Social Sciences and Humanities must, therefore, play a central role in understanding and tackling the problems we face. They help us deal with change and since change is constant, the Social Sciences and Humanities will always be an important part of the research landscape. (Geoghegan-Quinn 2011)

Some critics feel that the proactive arguments in support of the humanities which have gathered pace over the last decade have been unduly utilitarian in tone (Bate, British Academy, 2011b) but it is true that – although couched in terms designed to emphasise the importance of the social and economic contribution of humanities to society – these arguments have been crucial in developing a deeper understanding of their value. The same trend can be seen in similar debates taking place elsewhere, particularly in the US and in Australia where the controversial ‘Melbourne Model’, introduced in Melbourne University in 2007, created generalist undergraduate degree courses in which humanities were a key constituent, a model followed in some small ways by British institutions such as the Durham University combined honours BA which allows modules from up to four distinct subjects to be combined each year.

The humanities provide an education that enables an ability to understand and interpret, to judge and appreciate, to argue and agree and to speak and write well. Through engaging with them, students learn to inhabit multiple worlds and viewpoints, to analyse with precision, to communicate with grace and eloquence. The humanities encourage ways of thinking that are not defined by hard and fast rules; they encourage development of innovative solutions; they encourage intuition and creativity and they place a deep value on both imagination and empathy. What the humanities offer is a way of thinking about the world. The humanities and art are about human conditions and experiences beyond numbers and policies.

What steps, managerially, should those universities who are committed to maintaining strength in the humanities in the face of the challenge of high-fee levels post-2011 be taking? The key issue – as so often – is about communication, primarily the communication of these ideas about the value of the humanities to a number of different constituencies, in particular, to policy makers, institutional governing bodies, especially lay governors of HEIs and to prospective students and their parents. The impact of the lobbying by learned societies and research bodies in the humanities on policy makers has been discussed earlier. There is certainly no reason to become complacent about this, and there appears to be little danger of this as the deadline for the next comprehensive spending review draws closer. The growing stress placed by research councils, the Higher Education Funding Council England (especially via the rules surrounding the forthcoming Research Excellence Framework [REF 2014]) and other funding bodies on the importance of research impact, and more recently public engagement reflects a sector building up a body of evidence to ensure that the value of university research – in all fields including the humanities – is fully appreciated at a policy level and that an understanding of this informs high-level financial decisions.

Governing bodies of higher education institutions present a different challenge, despite the fact that many university councils are dominated – as many are – by people whose own background is in the Humanities. Lay governors appear to have a real fear – not as yet supported by much hard evidence, although application statistics to UCAS (2012) and beyond will begin to provide such evidence – that prospective students will make an instrumentalist choice of university degrees. As a result, there is some evidence that institutions are cutting or rationalising humanities options for fear that such courses will remain unfilled. This was the rationalisation provided by the Vice Chancellor of London Metropolitan University, Malcolm Gilles – himself a classicist – for London Metropolitan’s institutional decision, in the face of a financial crisis, to reduce substantially the number of degree programmes on offer. The report produced by London Metropolitan’s review of undergraduate provision was explicit that the degree courses on offer from the autumn of 2012 ‘would be those with proven popularity among the student body’. The programmes closed included history, philosophy, dance and the performing arts.

It is clear that the study of humanities remains attractive to students but the new challenge is to reassure potential undergraduates that investing in their own careers by studying a humanities subject is a sensible choice. There are caveats to using the available UCAS data, not least the demographic changes which mean the number of 18-year-olds has been reduced by 3.6%, but it is clear that perceptions of employability outcomes are having some impact on UCAS applications. UCAS figures published in January 2012 relating to autumn 2012 university entrance indicated that applications for medicine and law were down 3% and business by 5%, while applications for non-European languages were down 21% and for European languages down 10%. These perceptions by applicants are not always underpinned by a full understanding of the options and the wider world. In an increasingly globalised world, a graduate who could communicate in another European language and more especially a non-European language would be highly employable in a range of sectors. Likewise application for creative arts and design was down by 16%, despite the increasing acknowledgement of the flourishing role played by the creative Industries in the British economy which employ 1.5 million people. Exports of services by the creative industries accounted for 10.6 of the UK’s exports of service (DCMS 2011).

In confidently and effectively communicating the value of the humanities to prospective students universities need to be aware of the subtleties of the message; of the challenge posed by the expansion of higher education to a mass market. Recent research by economists demonstrates that the lifetime premium of the possession of a degree over not having a degree significantly by degree class and by institution (Naylor, Smith and Telhaj 2012; Naylor and Smith 2009). Universities need to draw carefully and accurately on the substantial existing evidence base to demonstrate the personal transformational value of a humanities degree and its potential lifetime value. The following exchange between Drew Faust – President of Harvard – and a NBC reporter sums up the challenge to those recruiting students to Humanities subjects.

NBC Reporter: When you think about how much students pay for College ... you want a job that you can hit the ground with making money and perhaps an occupation as an art historian won't pay the bills. If your child were to come home and say, Mom, I think I'm going to major in art history or philosophy, they may interpret their child [as a] slacker.

Drew Faust, What you study as an undergraduate is not necessarily the path you will follow professionally once you leave College ... Choices of undergraduate majors are not necessarily determinative of a life path. In fact they can install values and perspectives and habits of mind that will enable students to thrive in whatever field they may later choose.

The communications challenge needs also to be understood in the context of those students who are the first members of their families to attend university. For many applicants in this position, the understanding of how non-vocational degree programmes enhances employment opportunities is much less clear than to those who come from families who already have some experience of higher education. This may be particularly the case for members of ethnic minorities (Davis and Pampaka 2011). A research report commissioned by the Department of Education and Skills used the Higher Education Statistics Agency ethnicity data to explore the percentage of minority ethnic students as a percentage of total degree students by subject. Considerably higher representations of minority ethnic students are universities were in medicine, dentistry, computer science and law (over 30% in each in 2000–01) which contrasted with under 10% in languages, art and design, humanities and education. (Connor 2004) This statistical evidence is reinforced by qualitative evidence.

I did a BA in French and Spanish, but I got so much stick from other Asian students about it. They were incredulous that I was doing a supposedly inferior degree, when they were on business-related ones. They said: 'What sort of job will it lead to? There's no money in that'. [Eve Ahmed]. (MPACUK 2006)

Areas such as media and arts don't have the kudos of working for, say, Goldman Sachs. ... [Rumaana Habeeb]. All my Asian friends are planning careers in medicine, law or banking. I've noticed my white friends are much more flexible in their career choice. Without the Asian subcontinent family values we grew up with, they're more prepared to take on what we see as precarious, less prestigious careers [Rumaana Habeeb]. (MPACUK 2006)

Sunny Hundal, editor of *Asians in Media* magazine, says his parents were aghast he went into the media, despite a degree in economics. 'Traditionally, the son of the family provides a stable income so he can look after his parents in their old age'. (MPACUK 2006)

Similarly the broadcaster Hardeep Singh Kohli explained that his mother had wanted him to study law because it was one of the professions where she thought there was a secure income. He wished to follow his vocation as a broadcaster and she was initially both worried and hostile, because she did not recognise it as a proper career (Singh Kohli 2007). These attitudes present a substantial challenge to institutions wishing to recruit undergraduates to humanities degrees in a world where £9000 p.a. fees have become the norm. But failure to recruit will not only be a challenge to recruitment numbers but more crucially will deprive the humanities of the input from a diverse group of students who will be a real loss to the humanities. It is already clear that even in institutions with strong track records of widening participation, humanities subjects attract a less ethnically and socially diverse body of students.

Institutions need also to think beyond the traditional home market in seeking to recruit students to humanities subjects. The importance of university education as a major UK export is clearly recognised, as the recent debate over tightening up the issue of visas to overseas student has shown. Yet most institutions seeking to attract overseas students concentrate their efforts on recruiting to courses which focus on vocational, technical and economic subjects. And yet, if we accept the argument that a humanities training is crucial in developing an understanding that there is more than one way in which to view the world and that we need to challenge, transcend, erase and cross boundaries to succeed, then widening the marketing of humanities to overseas students will be of vital importance. Interestingly some current education trends in the Far East suggest that this is beginning to be recognised. There is a current debate in Japan, for example, over whether Japanese

higher education institutions should shift from their traditional April start of academic year enrolment to an autumn one to facilitate engagement with foreign students and researchers (THE 2012; *Japan Times* 2012). Currently, the proportion of Japanese students who study abroad is less than 3% and there is enthusiasm to increase this. Meanwhile in China, for example, Sun Yat-Sen University in Guangzhou has established a liberal arts college to broaden the perspective of their graduates. If those countries, which look set to become the global economic powerhouses in the twenty-first century, are recognising the value of the humanities, this is a very positive sign.

In terms of both research and teaching, there is huge potential for the humanities to face the next decades of the twenty-first century with confidence if not with complacency. There is huge emphasis across societies on the need for innovation. Successful innovation entails imagination, creativity and thinking that the world can be different from the way the world is now. It is hard to think that the world can be different unless you have a clear awareness that it has been different in the past or an understanding that, across the contemporary world, there are different cultural approaches, experiences or practices. A wide range of understanding across humanistic fields enables a deeper understanding of the world and how to improve it. There are plenty of challenges ahead but the Humanities have been a vital part of the civilised world for thousands of years and – with effective communication supported by a marshalling of appropriate evidence – they will remain so.

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