9
Conclusion

In this conclusion we start by giving an overview of the preceding chapters and finish by making some recommendations based on our research.

Overview

Each of the preceding chapters ended with a summary of the main points discussed. The purpose of this overview is not to repeat those summaries, but to draw out some important themes from the report as a whole.

The social dimension of the humanities

The relation between the humanities and society has featured in numerous ways over the last chapters. Here we highlight three of them.

In Chapter 2 we discussed some of the ways in which researchers and others articulate the value of the humanities. Looking through our own interview results, we found an interesting pattern. When answering for themselves, many respondents embraced the intrinsic value of research. But when asked to justify funding for research 'to an impatient and potentially hostile audience', well over half of them talked in terms of social value. Sometimes they were referring to social cohesion, but just as often they talked about the need for the humanities to help make decisions for society, typically about issues thrown up by technological innovation in the STEM subjects. As a close relative of social value, respondents also voted in large numbers for the value of cultural heritage.

Given the terms of our question, this might seem just a matter of rhetoric with respondents not saying what they themselves thought, but

what critics wanted to hear. But in Chapter 3 we saw that their interest in the social value of the humanities is matched by responses to the question about what sorts of themes have been dominating humanities research, or might do so in the future. Most respondents mentioned themes that could broadly be called social. So their sense of what is actually going on in their fields, including what is around the corner or what might even be a source of breakthroughs, matches well with what many would publicly use to defend funding for their subjects.

So far, this is about the attitudes of individual researchers. But in the Chapter 8 we considered the views of humanities advocates in national humanities associations alongside the responses of policy makers, as evidenced in funding decisions. The results are very mixed across different countries. The focus of the chapter was on the contrast between the US and the EU. What is currently happening in the EU looks like a developing success story for the humanities, especially in comparison to the bleak state of relations between the NEH and the US Congress. Not only is the level of public funding promised much higher than in the US; the EU Commission appears to be seriously interested in tapping into humanities research in order to inform its social policy – precisely one of the roles for the humanities we discussed in Chapter 2. So it is beginning to look as if we have an alignment between the aspirations of the humanists (Chapter 2), the kinds of topic they tend to work on (Chapter 3) and what is expected and promised by policy makers in one region (Chapter 8). But, on closer scrutiny, the EU experience throws up many questions and difficulties. Will the funding be as generous as promised? Will the vision of policy makers be broad enough and how enlightened will they actually be when it comes to grasping the real, long-term potential of the humanities to inform social decision-making? Will they show an interest in the content of the research, or merely in micro-managing it? Are institutions geared to support and develop research in ways that will stimulate curiosity and collaboration? As for the researchers themselves, they face difficult decisions about how to negotiate their compact with the policy makers, so are they trained in ways that will enable them to grasp opportunities? And, more fundamentally, can they maintain the distance and neutrality essential for good research, while keeping close enough to secure the trust and confidence of the policy makers they seek to advise?

Crossing boundaries

Another set of themes that has emerged over the course of this report concerns the existence of various kinds of boundary and the prospects or desirability of crossing them.

Translating the humanities

In Chapter 4 we looked at the ways in which humanities researchers attempt to bring the results of their work, or even conduct their work, outside the traditional boundaries of academia. What we termed translation (borrowing the word from medical practice) can exist in many different forms: working with museums to reach the public; going out to high schools; broadcasting on TV and radio; working with policy makers; and so on. No one can deny that there is a great deal of translation going on, and we gave examples of different types based on our own interviews and on national reports and other sources. But we also identified various obstacles to crossing the divide between the academic and the non-academic. One lies in academic culture itself. All too often translational activities are actually frowned upon by fellow researchers. We found evidence of such attitudes in countries as far apart as China and the Netherlands. In other countries the opposite is the case; in Russia and some parts of Latin America, the role of the public intellectual is alive and well. Indeed, some academics even wish the boundaries were sharper.

But, aside from the attitudes of fellow academics, we found a more systemic problem in academic managers and institutional leaders failing to incentivise such work. It often goes unrewarded and so can inhibit career advancement. Even if it is actually respected, institutions may do little to facilitate the process of translation, and the lone researcher has to act as entrepreneur as well as academic researcher to bring his or her work to a wider audience.

We are also aware of the dangers of encouraging translation in inappropriate ways. For example, we are not suggesting that institutional leaders should henceforth require applicants for project funding to build considerations of end use into the very framing of their proposals. Sometimes this may be appropriate, for instance a museum might commission research that will enable it to organise a particular exhibition for the benefit of the public. But it is often discoveries made in the disinterested pursuit of knowledge that result in the most important translation. So the ways of facilitating translation that we wish academic managers to find may typically come once research is well under way. We need to allow for serendipity; let humanists, like researchers in other fields, pursue their research on grounds of intellectual curiosity, without any explicit or conscious regard for what application or social value it may have. Our interest is in what happens when the results of the research turn out to be of immediate public interest or directly relevant to policy making. It needs to be possible for the researcher to cross

academic boundaries and reach other constituencies by established and recognised pathways, without having to do it unaided.

Disciplinary boundaries

The issue of interdisciplinary research has featured in two separate parts of the report. In Chapter 3 we looked over our interview responses to see what patterns, if any, existed when respondents talked about methodological trends in current or future research. More than half our respondents pointed towards cross-fertilisation as being the source of current or emerging research trends. This could involve some kind of intercultural comparison (e.g. comparing different philosophical traditions), but what many respondents had in mind was interdisciplinarity, whether among humanities subjects themselves, or between the humanities and the sciences (social or natural).

Then, in the first part of Chapter 5, we focused directly on interdisciplinary research. As well as reporting our respondents' views as to what it means to be interdisciplinary, and the advantages and disadvantages of such research, we also looked to see what they said about the institutional conditions that might inhibit or promote interdisciplinarity. We found anxieties expressed in quite different parts of the world about the tension between two forces: strategic support for interdisciplinary research and monodisciplinary bias in the criteria for hiring and promotion (especially as mediated by publication requirements). Thus, the academic boundaries that already exist are being reinforced by more general institutional conditions.

The digital humanities: technology versus tradition

In Chapter 6 we turned to the ways in which digitisation is transforming, or not, the humanities. After surveying what is happening globally in the field of the digital humanities, we turned to the attitudes of humanities researchers themselves. We pointed to the existence of blogs and other commentaries by staunch critics of the DH, and then looked at our interview sample to see how they viewed the field. While finding very little hostility, we did find a distinct lack of engagement. It seems that the DH are in danger of developing into their own clique and creating their own disciplinary silo, at the expense of alienating more traditional humanists. Our respondents welcomed the greater accessibility and convenience that digitisation brings, but very few identified the intellectual breakthroughs such technology might bring in its wake. In short, their knowledge of the field was sketchy and their enthusiasm for it quite weak. The development of the DH has, for whatever reasons,

helped to create a boundary between technologists and traditionalists. Even if this is not a boundary marked by any great hostility, there is a degree of passive resistance, or at least relative ignorance and indifference on the part of most humanists.

Internationalisation

The last kind of boundary we wish to mention here is that of the nation state. It is no surprise that, traditionally, the humanities have often reflected national perspectives and ideologies (especially given their well-established role in cultural heritage). On the other hand, some scholars have always aspired to cross national boundaries. But the trend towards globalisation has brought the whole issue of crossing nationally imposed (or created) intellectual boundaries to the forefront. In the second half of Chapter 6 we looked at our respondents' attitudes to this phenomenon. One might think that internationalisation can only be good for the humanities. As we saw in Chapter 3, some humanists think cross-cultural comparisons a fertile source of research breakthroughs and something that goes hand in hand with internationalisation, including the building of transnational research teams. Internationalisation is also a good means of building support and morale for researchers in countries where funding is poor or governments may be hostile to their work. This was certainly the message we received from respondents in quite different regions, from Russia to sub-Saharan Africa.

On the other hand, not everyone agreed that breaking down the boundaries is an unqualified benefit. Some complained about the growing homogenisation of research, which this might come about by: the imposition of a single research language (English) on publication and dissemination; or the growth of institutional rankings encouraging researchers around the world to chase after the same publication outlets, leaving the editors of international journals free to impose similar research agendas worldwide. Whether these fears are misplaced is a matter of debate. But, as academia inevitably becomes more global, we need to face up to the question of whether homogenisation will lead to something essential to the humanities being lost?

Another point about national (or regional) boundaries can be drawn from Chapter 7 on funding and infrastructure; that internationalisation tends to benefit stronger partners with abundant financial resources and infrastructure. As infrastructure needs to increase there is a risk of growing inequalities in the potential to do excellent research in underfunded research environments.

Finally, although globalisation tends to bring the world of researchers into dialogue, our interviews left us with an impression of clear regional patterns of research language and research culture. At least three main spheres of dialogue are evident: English language and norms dominate North America, Northern Europe, Australia and large parts of South and East Asia and Africa; French, Spanish and Portuguese languages and traditions dominate Southern Europe, Latin America and parts of Africa; big countries like China and Russia retain their own research cultures and native languages. Global humanities research is still very far from being the norm. Research excellence relies on international collaboration and competition that ultimately must build on mutual intelligibility of methods and a lingua franca. The challenge for the future is to ensure that the diversity of human experience is not lost. A point we shall return to.

The nature of the humanities

In Chapter 3 we looked at the way our interviewees viewed the nature of the humanities. Our own specific interest was in the nature of the humanities as truth seeking academic disciplines.

We found very few of our interviewees resistant to the idea that the humanities seek to advance knowledge. In this respect, they did not drive a wedge between the humanities and the sciences. Many, in fact, were happy to use the term findings to describe the outcome of humanities research. We would now like to develop this issue a little further.

The very concept of research in any domain, that of of *searching*, brings with it the hope of *finding* something, of discovery. If there is no prospect or interest in finding anything, it is entirely natural to ask what the point of any research is. And if there is going to be a process of finding, at least a successful one, it ought to be possible to articulate ways in which our knowledge or understanding of a particular area, object or field has been advanced. In short, we ought to be able to say how we are better off in terms of knowledge than we were before we started the research. This, we claim, follows quite naturally from the very concept of research, whatever the academic field.

Now consider disciplines outside the humanities. Whether in the natural or social sciences, in technology or medicine, researchers do not hesitate to talk about the outcome of their work in terms of discoveries, findings and results. Of course, any scientific finding might have to be revised, but accepting the possibility of revision in the future does not mean that one need be reluctant to talk about progress in terms of knowledge or understanding gained.

So, after looking at the very concept of research and then surveying all other academic disciplines, one might reasonably conclude that the same will apply to the humanities. Why should the humanities be different in this regard? If one insists that they are, one would have to explain what it is about the nature of their objective that might lead to a difference. When we study the human, or the human condition, or human culture, decision-making, ideas, texts, and so on why should it be that we are suddenly unable to produce findings and advance knowledge? Is the nature of these topics so much more intractable than, for instance, distant galaxies, mathematical proofs or long-extinct species? As authors of this report we would find this anomaly, if it does exist, quite baffling and it seems our respondents, on the whole, agree.

We would go further, or at least be more explicit. We view the humanities, no less than the other sciences, as truth seeking. Although we only discussed this issue explicitly in Chapter 3, it is strongly related to the two broader issues we have been discussing in this conclusion. First, those who try to split the humanities from the sciences in the ways described are in effect creating yet another kind of boundary to be negotiated. In our view this boundary is fictitious, not to say unhelpful. There are better ways of making distinctions between academic disciplines, which cut across the humanities/sciences division, for instance: some areas of philosophy, with their particular focus on proof, have much in common with mathematics; historians, archaeologists, geologists, astronomers study the past; engineers and students of the arts engage in the creative manipulation of materials for problem-solving. So there are different and quite subtle ways of thinking about the similarities and dissimilarities between academic disciplines that would avoid us making wrong-headed assumptions about our identity as humanists.

Second, the issue about the nature of the humanities connects with the relation between the humanities and society. As we have just argued, the model of research as essentially concerned with advancing knowledge is deeply intuitive, so that the public and policy makers will most likely endorse it and expect researchers to be concerned about making new gains in knowledge and understanding. Yet, if some humanists dispute the model for their own fields, how will they then present themselves to society? What account will they give of themselves to justify their support, and more generally, their value? Admittedly, they will have no problem expressing the value of the humanities in terms of critical thinking, but other values will be deeply problematic, like how are they supposed to inform social decision-making if they don't actually advance knowledge? Now, humanists who genuinely reject the truth

seeking model are entitled to do so. But it is hardly a choice to be taken lightly and it needs to be defended rigorously, not assumed as a dogma. And the consequences of taking this view of the social standing of the humanities need to be thought through carefully and consistently.

Like many humanists, we are concerned about the low social esteem in which our subjects are often held (a point discussed at the end of Chapter 3). Part of the reason for this low esteem may lie in the fact that humanities disciplines cannot hold up obvious examples of utility as easily as, say, medicine and engineering. But we also think that the unfounded (or at least uncritical) rejection of the humanities as disciplines that advance knowledge creates a serious problem for public esteem. Thus, we welcome the fact that most of our interviewees were prepared to talk of humanities research in terms of advances in knowledge and understanding.

Recommendations

In closing, we offer some more extended thoughts as to what might be done to address the challenges to the humanities as we see them. We start with some specific recommendations, which follow quite straightforwardly from the preceding chapters. We then turn to some broader considerations about the future of the humanities.

Specific recommendations

The nature of the humanities

Following on from the previous section, we recommend that we reinstate confidence in the humanities as truth finding disciplines, through which we can claim to advance knowledge while being fully aware of the contingent character of our results. Certainly, we need to communicate that much of our work involves talking around a phenomenon, expanding on context and criticising assumptions, as in all fields of research. Still, we do seek and find truths; we do generate answers, as well as questions. We should be prepared to insist that, in this respect, the humanities do not differ from other academic disciplines.

Translation

We have found that there is currently insufficient support for researchers who want to bring their work to a wider audience, or work with stakeholders outside academia. All too often these researchers end up being lone actors, having to play too many roles at once, and their labours are

not adequately recognised even when they succeed. We recommend that institutional leaders think more clearly and practically about support systems for effective translation and create real incentives to encourage more academics to engage in it.

The digital humanities

In Chapter 4, we found evidence of a culture gap between traditional humanists and experts in the digital humanities. This gap urgently needs to be bridged. One initiative might be taken by DH experts to start the process of bridge-building. We believe it would be useful to highlight – in terms that will resonate with the traditionalists – several case studies illustrating the *intellectual* power and potential of the DH: how have they thrown up radically new research questions or new ways of thinking about old ones? How are they more than just a means of making research materials more readily accessible? These were exactly the questions we found many of our respondents unable to answer. A second initiative may be for funders and universities to consider how successfully we are training the next generation of humanists to exploit the potential of digital technologies and methods. Are doctoral supervisors only too happy to see well-known methods used by young researchers or are they actively encouraging the use of these new approaches?

Interdisciplinary research

The quest for interdisciplinarity should not be treated as an end in itself, either by researchers or by research funding authorities and policy makers. The most important thing is to ask good questions, sometimes requiring an interdisciplinary effort, sometimes not. However, there is no doubt that interdisciplinarity does have considerable value in numerous contexts and many of our interview respondents reported genuine enthusiasm for it. At the same time it faces significant institutional barriers. Where these exist they should be seriously addressed. In particular, we recommend that promotion criteria are reformed so as to give due weight to interdisciplinary research, in such a way that it no longer appears risky in terms of publication and career advancement.

Humanities and public policy

In Chapter 8 we paid special attention to developments in the EU regarding humanities policy. There is the potential for substantial increases in project funding, as well as a reported willingness on the part of EU leaders to seek advice from the humanities on policy matters. Alongside the opportunities, however, there are challenges: will the humanities succeed in

achieving significant funding increases, and how will they keep an appropriate academic distance from those they advise? Will funders understand the importance of investing in research on long-term human challenges? We recommend that these developments be watched closely as they unfold, not just by Europeans, but by others who would like to see the humanities take a much more prominent role in society and social decision-making in their own countries. We think that all parties concerned will benefit from increased scrutiny of these developments to see how well they maintain academic freedom alongside social influence.

Wider considerations and recommendations

The preceding recommendations are all practical in nature. However, we want to highlight some considerations that may be less easy to act on but may help articulate how and why the humanities might matter more in the future. We shall consider them under three headings: the diversity of the human experience; articulating the relevance of the humanities; and integration of knowledge.

The diversity of human experience

The humanities are a unique repository of knowledge and insight into the rich diversity of the human experience, past and present. We draw on this insight for pleasure and wisdom as much as for direct utility. We derive insights from social and cultural diversity and understanding of human responses, motivations and actions in the face of direct and indirect challenges. We draw on the wealth of artistic and intellectual representations to learn how the human race grapples with existence and understands its place in the universe.

A loss of linguistic and cultural competence diminishes our collective intelligence. We cannot know when or how we may want or need to command specialist skills and draw on comparative insights. Therefore, we need to protect and develop humanistic competencies in their full diversity.

UNESCO maintains lists of tangible and intangible human cultural heritage which are used to preserve highlights of the human experience. In a wider sense the humanities safeguard human existence by recording and unlocking traces of the human mind through time.

In this regard, our endeavours are no different from the incessant strife to document and protect the biodiversity of the world. In defence of natural life, it is often argued that the greater the biodiversity the greater nature's resilience to environmental stress will be. It is also

frequently maintained that species and habitat diversity combine to provide yet more diversity in the world, and that any loss reduces the human quality of life.

Such arguments in favour of diversity are sometimes ridiculed by arguments that nobody will suffer from the disappearance of the last few specimens of a butterfly. Similarly, nobody will suffer bodily harm from losing our competence to understand an arcane language or losing insight into the religious practice of a long-lost tribe. But we believe that, while a single loss may be deplorable, a succession of losses may turn into an intellectual cancer.

In this sense, the humanities' intrinsic value is that they provide a key to human diversity without which we cannot understand ourselves.

Articulating the relevance of the humanities

At the same time, there is no doubt that humanities research is instrumentally valuable, whether socially, economically, politically or in other ways. We want to sound a note of warning about how we articulate this relevance. It is not the case that each piece of research can be correlated with a specific benefit. The value of our research tends to fall out of humanities research holistically and over the long-term. Even when a particular piece of research does have a particular application, it may not be evident until long afterwards.

So, on the whole, we should not confront each and every researcher with the 'so what?' question, as in 'what is the usefulness of your particular research?' Of course, some researchers will find the question entirely appropriate and not difficult to answer. There are cases of 'low-hanging fruit', where particular results have an obvious application (bioethics, linguistics, musicology, environmental history, etc.). Researchers should be encouraged to make the applications and this is part of our discussion in Chapter 5 on translation. Also, some humanists are very good at drawing out the long-term value of their fields by looking holistically at their discipline and seeing how it translates into current and future social benefit.

As a fictitious example, imagine some research done in medieval Florentine love poetry. Such research may not be of immediate social use, and yet it is precisely the unique insight into human relations in another time and setting that can provide essential insights into human nature. Sometimes the insight may only be at a comparative level, at other times it is possible to generate wider general statements based on research findings.

Many humanists are expert at drawing out such connections, but not everyone is or needs to be, and such work depends on others having pursued their research in an 'ivory tower' kind of way. So, just like all other curiosity-driven scientists, humanists should not typically be expected to answer the 'so what?' question. On the contrary, querying the potential impact of research could actually be damaging to the ability of the humanities to produce socially beneficial research over the long term.

The integration of knowledge

Our final recommendation concerns the integration of knowledge. In our specific recommendations above, we included a section on interdisciplinary research. This recommendation was intended to ensure that those working on interdisciplinary questions are not penalised by current criteria regarding career advancement. This is a recommendation to ensure that such arrangements avoid any kind of monodisciplinary bias by those charged with hiring, promotion or tenure decisions. The recommendation does not attempt to challenge current institutional structures, but it does involve adjusting arrangements within existing structures. In this way it is a proposal for the short- or medium-term.

The issue of integrating knowledge can be discussed in a more radical and far-reaching way. First of all, we need to take stock of the wider problem. The professionalisation of academic research in the natural, technical and social sciences, as well as in the humanities, is based on a division of labour and expertise. This is probably an inevitable result of the ongoing progress of knowledge in all fields of research, of the fact that each of us only has a limited capacity and of the diversity of nature and culture. However, as knowledge is compartmentalised, wisdom may be sacrificed to expediency and our collective intelligence may suffer.

On the other hand, we have seen at several points in this report that there are counteracting developments, such as digital methodologies enabling researchers to draw on and collate data of multiple origin and form. New approaches have given rise to multi- and interdisciplinary fields, such as cognition, medical humanities and environmental humanities. New uses of humanities research are also helping to integrate scholarship and other types of knowledge, as now occurs in the use of historical data for public planning, of narrative models for business, of arts technology for media, and of philosophy for bioethics. Furthermore, long-standing disciplines, such as languages, literature and history of ideas, are becoming ever more important to overcoming cultural borders in a globalising world.

In our view, something radical is needed to address the problems of disintegration and take advantage of these opportunities. What we have in mind is to create integrative platforms as spaces for networking, capacity building and preparation of research on questions at the core of our interest in understanding the human condition. By platforms we intend something larger and more long-term than research projects and centres. Many important crossroads, centres and institutes already exist that address important research questions in innovative ways. They often come with funding instruments such as a web platform, a postgraduate or doctoral school, visiting fellowships and stakeholder interaction. What we imagine is something that would go beyond such initiatives, which are often limited in scope by institutional frameworks and funding horizons.

Integrative platforms may be entirely virtual in the early stage, while physical entities may be useful later. The platforms should bring together experts from all fields of science and scholarship to identify, review and develop current knowledge – for examples in the fields mentioned above – and to identify what we know and what we might know, given a large effort of money, collaboration, methodological improvement and theoretical honing. Such grand research challenges would mean identifying approaches that are not only broad and long-lasting enough to integrate intellectual energies and resources right across the humanities, but also in a way that reaches out to other disciplines. They should aim to lower the barriers between the human, the social and the natural sciences; multiply the learning capacity of many excellent research environments; and enable knowledge transfer and co-production among researchers and other societal actors. Moreover, the transnational structure of such platforms, and the reflective processes of working groups, would develop new best practices for global humanities research.

How would these platforms be developed? Funders would clearly play a major role. Integrative platforms would require substantial investment and long-term dedication over and above current three- to five-year cycles of funding. They would also require a commitment to furthering global humanities without regard to national priorities. Intellectual commitment must be the guiding light. Whatever research challenges are chosen, they must come from a commitment to fulfilling the promise of the humanities in helping us understand the human condition: how do we perceive the world, what motivates us, and what may cause us to change direction?

Our concern here is not to second-guess what the research challenges, integrating themes and methodologies might be. This would require a

sustained conversation among interested parties from different fields and regions. That intellectual conversation needs to happen first. Funders might want to organise workshops and conferences, perhaps supported by some of the numerous humanities centres around the world.

We make this proposal because there is a crying need for experiment over and above the traditional university and its disciplinary divides. There is a need for institutional and funding developments that promote the integration of knowledge. However, the establishment of integrative platforms is not intended to replace current structures, but to supplement them. In the end the platforms would depend on research done in traditional university departments and the benefit would run in all directions.

Envoi

At the beginning of this report we said we would not be raising a battle cry for the humanities. All too often, commentators talk about the 'Crisis of the Humanities'. Indeed, as soon as one hears the word humanities, one suspects the word crisis is just around the corner, but the humanities are not in a crisis. Although funding is an issue, we did not find general evidence of disproportionate decline. Epistemologically, the humanities are divided, but not in the strong sense that is often implied; that of a loss of confidence in humanistic knowledge resulting from the postmodernist trend of the 1980s, which has largely been overcome. The world, of course, is beset with crises: lack of trust in financial institutions; inaction in the face of planetary environmental threats; and inequality of opportunities and resources across the world. These are all very human problems, and the humanities have a vital part to play in their solution. But, rather than talk about a crisis in the humanities, we have sought to pinpoint specific and longer-term challenges, such as the need to integrate research more systematically than we do at present. Only if these challenges are met can we realise the full potential of the humanities to help us understand ourselves and make a better world.