UNIVERSITY OF
CAMBRIDGE
INSTITUTE FOR
SUSTAINABILITY LEADERSHIP

# Exploring the multiple contributions of the arts and humanities to leadership

A working paper by the
University of Cambridge Institute
for Sustainability Leadership

# The University of Cambridge Institute for Sustainability Leadership

The University of Cambridge Institute for Sustainability Leadership (CISL) is a globally influential Institute developing leadership and solutions for a sustainable economy. We believe the economy can be 'rewired', through focused collaboration between business, government and finance institutions, to deliver positive outcomes for people and environment. For over three decades we have built the leadership capacity and capabilities of individuals and organisations, and created industry-leading collaborations, to catalyse change and accelerate the path to a sustainable economy. Our interdisciplinary research engagement builds the evidence base for practical action.

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## Citing this report

## Acknowledgements

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# A leadership case for arts and humanities

One of the consequences of the global pandemic has been a heightened awareness of the importance of science, technology and data in responding to global crises.[1] Moreover, it is widely recognised that Covid-19 has accelerated significantly the shift to digital technologies and services – across sectors as diverse as commerce, health, education, finance, manufacturing and ICT,[2] catalysing what has been termed the Fourth Industrial Revolution.[3] With advances in artificial intelligence, robotics, the Internet of Things and quantum computing fundamentally altering the way we live, work and relate to one another, it is easy to see how science and technology are critical to future leadership.

Yet what of the contribution of the arts and humanities? Prior to Covid-19, commentators suggested that – by some measures – the humanities were in decline, even crisis, with falling student enrolments for languages, and historical and philosophical humanities, in the UK between 2014 and 2019.[4] Have recent global events firmly sounded the death knell for such disciplines? Or, at this critical point in history, as societies reflect deeply on the failings and fragility of current systems and the quality of leadership that we need, might this be a critical juncture for recognising the vital importance of the arts and humanities?

Economist James Meadway argues that, in the wake of Covid-19, we are not simply looking at a recession or "financial crisis" but a "profound dislocation of the essential components of economic and social life itself".[5] The leadership taken now, not only in response to economic fragility but also on issues of increasing structural inequality, ecological decimation, and abrupt and irreversible climate changes, will profoundly shape generations to come. Scientists have rightly been at the forefront of such debates – keeping society abreast of trends and trajectories, and providing accountability in terms of progress made. Yet science alone will not suffice in supporting radical shifts to a positive, flourishing future for all.

In a personal comment on the Covid-19 pandemic, Professor of Infectious Disease Modelling Graham Medley, a member of the UK Government's Scientific Advisory Group for Emergencies (SAGE), argued that "while scientists can ensure that any strategies are underpinned by the best evidence and research, they should have no greater say in them than economists, ethicists, historians and the wider public".[6] Indeed, far from diminishing the relevance of the arts and humanities, society's growing reliance on science and technology amplifies the need for such insights. Some have argued that the skills most in demand as we navigate the Fourth Industrial Revolution will in fact be philosophy and ethical reasoning.[7] When it comes to responding to the most pressing leadership challenges that we face – be that economic recovery from Covid-19 or navigating the climate crisis – science cannot nor should not have all the answers. As Dr Erle C. Ellis comments in *The New York Times*, "[t]he real question is how we better negotiate among ourselves, across all our many diverse peoples and cultures, so that we can navigate together toward the better futures we wish for, in our different ways".[8]

The hiring record of some of the world's major employers certainly suggests that organisations recognise the value that an arts and humanities education can bring to their leadership. In 2017, the British Academy found that 58 per cent of chief executives of FTSE 100 index companies have studied arts, humanities or social sciences.[9] Research by the Strada Institute and Emsi in the US reports a similar story.[10] Some of the most influential business and technology leaders, for example Susan Wojcicki, CEO of YouTube, and Kenneth Chenault, former CEO of American Express, are arts and humanities graduates.

A growing number of voices, however, are calling for a new purposeful leadership that delivers not only for business, but also wider society and the environment.[11] Wider societal purpose is not something that is unique to the arts and humanities; it is clear that science and technology too can be applied with or without a clear ambition to improve societal outcomes. Yet the UK's National Statistician Professor Sir Ian Diamond argues that the arts, humanities and social sciences bring a specific element, the 'human', that is so essential in today's world, making graduates of these subjects "ever more critical to the creation of the sort of society to which we would all like to belong".[12] What is arguably lacking are strong, compelling and memorable narratives about what these subjects are and what they do, particularly in the context of wider societal impact.[13]

# The project

The Cambridge Institute for Sustainability Leadership, in partnership with the University of Cambridge School of Arts and Humanities, undertook to explore more deeply the ways in which the arts and humanities might inform future leadership. The project interviewed 20 faculty members from a range of disciplines across Architecture and History of Art, Asian and Middle Eastern Studies, Classics, Divinity, English, History, Modern and Medieval Languages, Philosophy and the Language Centre at the University of Cambridge. The aim was to gather diverse insights across these varying fields and consider how these insights might inform leadership responses to some of the most pressing and profound challenges and opportunities facing society.

The following summarises three emerging narratives about the distinctive contribution of the arts and humanities.

# Emerging narratives

## 1.    Navigating complexity, uncertainty and the unknown

Perhaps more than any other generation, current and future leaders will be working in what has been termed a 'VUCA' context – volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous. Rittel and Webber first coined the term 'wicked' problems to describe those challenges characterised by incomplete, contradictory and changing requirements, and a social complexity that means they have no obvious stopping point or solution.[14] Many of the issues faced by current and future leaders – financial crises, health care, income disparity, terrorism, climate change – are now widely recognised as 'wicked' in nature, particularly in the way they intersect with each other. For instance, a history of conflict, poverty and weak governance in fragile states increases vulnerability to climate change, which in turn forces governments to redirect scarce resources to adaptation or humanitarian responses, further threatening peace and security.[15] Leadership must be able to navigate such complexity, variability, incompleteness and the 'unknown'.

The arts and humanities are instrumental in nurturing a capacity for deep, clear, multi-faceted and nuanced analysis of complex problems. Martin Millett, Professor of Classical Archaeology, speaks of students being fluent users of imperfect, incomplete, unpredictable data from multiple sources, using different theoretical lenses to make sense of evidence in multiple ways. It is not hard to see how such capabilities might be valuable in informing nuanced policy responses to complex social issues. Professors of Philosophy Huw Price and Rae Langton both speak of the clarity of thinking, reasoning and argument nurtured through philosophy as a discipline, which is of great value at a time when traditional venues for reasoned debate are under attack.

Catherine Pickstock, Professor of Divinity, speaks of how frameworks and concepts enable students of theology to be comfortable with the incompleteness of knowledge without having to abandon questions of what is real and meaningful – something that might prove to be vital in shaping public discourse around important normative questions. Moreover, the ability to present complexity coherently without artificially reducing or simplifying, argues Tim Whitmarsh, Professor of Greek Culture, means that an arts and humanities training equips leaders to acknowledge and work with diversity, divergence and dissent, rather than seeking to hide it. This arguably opens up the potential for more authentic, fairer and credible dialogue on important issues.

Dealing with complexity and the unknown is not unique to the arts and humanities; every discipline has to work through how it navigates the boundaries of knowledge. Yet one might argue that the ability to consider from multiple angles, to keep open the possibility for meaning in the context of the unknown and unknowable, and to work with complexity without having to artificially reduce it, are peculiarly suited to the 'wicked' social and ecological challenges of the 21st century.

# 2. The importance of climbing into other worlds

Chris Young, Professor of Modern and Medieval German, argues that the arts and humanities are a collective archive of how people have thought about themselves, their environment and what it means to 'be human' throughout history. Studying the arts and humanities involves climbing into these other different worlds across time and space. Done well, this experience nurtures the capacity to understand, appreciate and have empathy for other languages, other cultures, and other ways of seeing, knowing and doing.

This is critical for several reasons. Language is intimately connected with culture and identity, argues Geoffrey Khan, Professor of Hebrew. His work to preserve the linguistic heritage of persecuted minority groups in the Middle East, for example Aramaic-speaking Christian communities who have been displaced from their homes since the First World War, is playing a part in mitigating their traumatic loss of culture. As Jocelyn Wyburd from the Cambridge Language Centre contends, language provides a window into other ways of seeing and understanding the world. The study of language cultivates empathy and inter-cultural understanding, which in turn builds trust and provides a more robust foundation for co-operation. Indeed, research undertaken by Professor Ianthi Tsimpli, Chair of English and Applied Linguistics, suggests that those who have multiple languages show greater adaptability, flexibility and inclusivity in their social values.

Encountering and appreciating other worlds can also help challenge ingrained assumptions and received wisdoms. Both Simon Goldhill and Tim Whitmarsh, Professors of Greek Culture, argue that training ourselves to see the past through the eyes of other cultures helps us to interrogate our inherited conceptual categories and what is considered 'natural'. For instance, as Tim Whitmarsh argues in his work exploring race, colour vocabulary is often felt by its users to be natural and obvious, but inevitably uses the categories that we have learned from those around us. Understanding that categories are not fixed but a product of historical circumstance may then assist with opening up a more hopeful discussion. Public discourse around gender and sexual identity are other areas where debates within the arts and humanities have had a profound impact in recent years.

The decolonising movement has been a critical development within the arts and humanities, particularly with regard to giving a voice to other cultures, argues Mikael Adolphson, Professor of Japanese Studies. Core to such debates is the issue of representation and identity, contends Clair Wills, Professor of English Literature; put simply, what stories are told, about whose experience, in what way and by whom. As Dr Priya Gopal, Reader in English, observes, the challenge is to undo the damaging legacies of the European imperial project perpetuated by language, concepts and practices.

Race relations and social cohesion are not the only societal goods under threat from an unexamined use of language. Professor of Divinity Catherine Pickstock argues that language reflects metaphysical assumptions about the 'other' in terms of non-human nature, in particular a prevailing narrative that the natural world is a resource to be plundered. In critically examining such issues of representation, the arts and humanities are at the forefront of tackling entrenched social and ecological injustices.

Finally, the experience of engaging with other worlds and perspectives can be a great stimulus for imagination and creativity. Rae Langton, Professor of Philosophy, speaks of philosophical methods as a tremendous resource for the curious, stimulating the imagination. Steven Connor, Professor of English, speaks of the contribution of the arts and humanities to "nourishing the edge of things". He cautions against a narrowly instrumental view of knowledge that shuts down unpredictable areas of enquiry, arguing instead that we need to 'tutor' our imaginations. Paul Russell, Professor of Celtic, speaks of imagination in the 'slower' details as well as the big thinking, giving substance to ideas.

It is important not to underestimate the importance of these capabilities for leadership. The ability to question taken-for-granted assumptions, to interrogate the societal values perpetuated by language, to imagine different present and future realities, and to think creatively and experimentally, has arguably never been more important amidst calls to transform 'business as usual' in response to the social and ecological crises facing humanity.

# 3.    Exploring what it is to 'be human'

Finally, the arts and humanities explore what it is to 'be human' in the variety of human experience. They are about celebrating and enjoying some of the highest levels of human achievement and creativity around the world and through time. In so doing, as Professor of the Philosophy of Religion Douglas Hedley argues, they are more than simply a vocational training ground; they nurture the soul's yearning for beauty through the joy and richness of varied traditions. Dr Clare Chambers, Reader in Political Philosophy, speaks of the arts and humanities as not just understanding, but "being all the things that humans are". At the heart of these artistic and creative endeavours, Professor Steven Connor argues, is the question of "what for?"

Far from being abstract and irrelevant to contemporary leadership, contemplating 'being human', meaning and purpose are as critical as they have ever been. Indeed, there has been an explosion of interest in the importance of purpose for leaders and leadership over the last two or three years, especially in the context of seeking to repair the fractured relationship between business and society. Dr Simone Kotva from Divinity emphasises the importance of developing 'double vision'. To view societal challenges through the 'single vision' of science is to neglect the importance of value, meaning, purpose and the resultant 'stories' that enable us to act upon the 'facts'.

As technology advances at a startling rate, understanding what it is to 'be human' becomes even more critical. In the inter-disciplinary context of architecture, Dr Ying Jin argues that the arts and humanities are vital for appreciating how people understand, accept and use new technologies. In the context of machine learning, Professor of Philosophy Huw Price argues that the more powerful Artificial Intelligence (AI) becomes and the more we can ask it to do for us, the more important it will be to understand its impacts and specify its goals with great care. We need to understand our own leanings

and values as humans and align AI's goals with these values. Issues of ethics and judgement are inextricably bound up with technological advancement, and need to be identified and negotiated.

Of course, those in the arts and humanities have no claim to the final say in debates around the meaning of life, human existence and planetary wellbeing. They are, however, well placed to reflect on the vital cultural, theological, philosophical, linguistic and historical dimensions to human identity and being, and therefore to enrich our understanding of what it is to be human. One key challenge – as Dr Priya Gopal acknowledges – is that in seeking to expose flawed bases for universalism, how do we avoid descending into cultural particularism, undermining the potential for common ground and solidarity? Her work on how Asian and African insurgency within the British Empire shaped British ideas of freedom and equality, pushing the boundary of what it means to be human in a global frame, is one such contribution to exploring what it means to bridge rather than suppress difference.

The very fact that the arts and humanities are wrestling with these tensions confirms their importance for informing contemporary leadership. The current geo-political landscape is characterised by a growing protectionism between states and fragmentation within nations, at a time when humanity arguably needs to unite to address global issues such as climate change and ecological decimation. Leadership that 'draws together' in the midst of complexity, respecting difference whilst nurturing common ground and connection, is invaluable.

# Concluding thoughts

The 20 interviews undertaken for this study represent a tiny fraction of the vast range of research and teaching being undertaken across the academic arts and humanities, yet they point to the vital and distinctive contribution of these disciplines to current and future leadership: bringing coherence and clarity without suppressing difference and dissent; nurturing a sensibility to other worlds and cultivating empathy, conviction and creativity; and exploring those questions of purpose, meaning, beauty, value and what it is to 'be human'.

For university departments, the outworking of this is not the need to shout more loudly or be more defensive, nor is it to pursue an artificially singular narrative about the value of the arts and humanities. Rather, as Professor Chris Young, Head of the School of Arts and Humanities at the University of Cambridge, encourages, it is to "draw together" in the diversity to celebrate and affirm these crucial insights, without which science and technology have – at best – only one eye open.

For those in business, government or civil society, this represents a timely reminder that the development of leaders based on a narrow privileging of one particular discipline – be that economics, or science, or technology – might not cultivate the capabilities that are needed to navigate the complexity, nuance and ethics of contemporary societal issues. Not only is there a need to cultivate a genuinely diverse workforce that is able to bring empathy, creativity and the capacity for moral

judgement alongside technical and scientific dimensions, there is also the need to value the academic disciplines that nurtured that very diversity in how we see, process and engage with the world around us – for the sake of better organisations, and for the sake of a better future for us all.

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