

Conclusions and proposals for improvement from the seminar “Challenges in university education in the field of Humanities”

The seminar “Challenges in university education in the field of Humanities” was held on 19 June 2019 at the Faculty of Geography and History of the University of Barcelona. It constituted a forum for dialogue and reflection on the relationship between study programmes in Humanities and the labour market and our society. Throughout the seminar, presentations and debates brought together varying issues: culture as a field of employability; the relationship between culture, humanities and arts as a condition for a fairer society; and, elements for reflecting on the nature of humanities as a discipline and potential avenues for improvement.

From the **standpoint of employability**, the diagnosis on employment shows low rates of suitability and, on average, rather low salaries. In terms of culture as a field of employability, the weakness of the sector explains the **low demand** for study programmes in Humanities as a first choice, with students opting for more professionally-oriented applied study programmes such as Journalism or Audiovisual Communication. In addition to weak demand, there is a failure to enforce entry level requirements. Indeed, certain countries such as [Japan](#) or [Denmark](#) have witnessed cutbacks in the programmes offered. The “simple” solution would entail raising entry level requirements and reducing the programmes offered. Having said that: in terms of added value, should universities be institutions for the education of academic elites or should they be institutions offering education to all individuals aspiring to pursue a university education? Regardless, it should be noted that from the point of view of employability, there are fields – as reported in relation to graduates of Linguistics, for instance – that stand out due to benefitting from appealing options in terms of access to the labour market in the technology sector, as indeed Maria Díaz pointed out.

From the **perspective of the value of humanities in achieving fairer societies** and as a condition for a more equitable society and for human dignity, evidence suggests that three years after the completion of the study programmes 70% per cent of graduates would take the same study programme again if given the option despite a proportion of these not performing functions requiring a university education. The social value of humanities as a transforming element is so significant that in certain countries like [Brazil](#) it is seen as a threat. Along these lines, Ferran Barenblit advocated a need to move away from the reactive discourse of “society does not understand our value” to adopt an approach based on proactive forums, ones of resistance, to illustrate the contribution of arts and humanities when it comes to being able to create a fairer society where the notion of progress cannot be trusted (and it is necessary to be vigilant for reactionary developments).

A third element that arose was the **nature of humanities and potential avenues for improvement and innovation in the study programmes**. With the exception of Linguistics, humanities research focuses on understanding the societies in which the faculties are found. Placing the emphasis on a local understanding of societies makes it difficult to produce messages with global impact in high-impact, English-language journals where a phenomenon of research standardisation unfolds and, according to Dr Garcés, there is a degree of “domestication of the intellectual function”.



The data from the employers' survey give a score, with regard to their satisfaction with graduates of Humanities, of 'remarkable', although shortcomings are reported in terms of practical training and problem solving ability. The forecast section points out the challenge associated with incorporating new technologies.

According to Dr Blockmans, the **advent of technologies** constitutes an opportunity to renew curriculums. Technologies make it possible to connect data on an unprecedented scale, heralding new horizons. Likewise, the traditional division of study programmes in the field of Humanities according to the object of study becomes meaningless in a multimedia realm where elements that have traditionally been studied separately are brought together in a single device. Humanities not only involve the study of texts and objects; rather, they consist of the study of their impact on society. The mission of Humanities is to incorporate culture into society, to recover the lessons of the past, to understand the identities of the "self" and of the "others", and to preserve cultural heritage, among others.

To address these challenges, the following proposals for improvement are set:

From the standpoint of employability

1. To ensure all graduates develop excellent basic skills, such as the ability to write, reason and communicate.
2. To promote cross-disciplinary skills: the ability to become social and political beings, exploring uncharted territory, with the ability to work in a team and generate empathy, and with critical capacity and a global vision.
3. To promote external training placements as a stage of training enabling students to gain an acquaintance of the labour market and become more familiar with the culture of "problem solving", whilst guaranteeing the quality of these placements.

From the standpoint of social value and curricular innovation

4. **To dignify** humanities: dignity is not something that is granted to us, we award it to ourselves (self-dignification). To consider humanities as a condition for achieving more learned societies, able to address the complexity of challenges based on dialogue, using the lessons of the past.
5. **To seek to apply** those things we know and those we do not to our current-day problems: to endeavour with regard to our current-day problems. To refocus or place emphasis on research in humanities having **social impact**: for instance, language acquisition for immigrants or consideration of historical lessons. To capitalise on public interest: to promote the presence of humanities in public debates.
6. **To foster the interdisciplinary nature of humanities**: steering away from a focus on a single object (text, sound, objects, social practices) and moving towards multimedia programmes. To capitalise on new technologies so that elements that have traditionally been studied separately are brought together. To place emphasis not only on the study of texts or objects, but also on how this study has an **impact on society** (understanding society, comprehending the challenges it faces, helping to figure it out in all its complexity). **To diversify**: profound epistemological diversity, avoiding the exclusion of knowledge-based practices (for instance, critical or creative writing). **Shifting the core** (western, non-western, gender-based, etc.): breaking with the logic of minor disciplines



vs. major ones. **To promote creativity:** living, creative, open and daring practices often take place outside the confines of the university.

7. **To cross borders:** to work in conjunction with study programmes from other disciplines in order to incorporate capacity for reasoning and debate, and a historical and ethical perspective for future professionals. Discipline stakeholders in the field of Humanities need to endeavour to identify the sectors in which humanistic education is essential and put forward educational proposals applied to the various professional spheres: for instance, history of the economy applied to Economics, ethics applied to Journalism or to study programmes in Biosciences, etc.