

‘Humanities in a changing world’ by Professor Julia Black, President of the British Academy

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We have seen a persistent decline in the study of humanities subjects at school and in universities, though the picture is mixed both across subjects and across the UK. It is also clear that humanities departments are bearing the brunt of recent university cuts. To reverse those trends, humanities needs to find different ways to articulate its value, and to show how humanities are responding in our changing world.

Introduction

Thank you for inviting me to speak here today. It is a great pleasure to be here.

In preparing for this speech, I resisted turning to ChatGPT, but I did turn to the old fashioned version of Google, and making sure to draw on a reputable source, I found myself reading a [blog](#) on the British Academy’s website by the wonderful historian Professor Diarmaid MacCulloch titled *What is the Humanities?* Given how convincingly he answers not just the what but the why, it was tempting to simply read it out word for word – but as that might take some time I’ll distil it instead: he argues the humanities are no more, and no less than the study of ‘humanity itself: humanity past and present alike, together with whatever thoughts, concerns and hopes about human futures that those studies provoke¹

But giving this audience a definition of humanities is like bringing coals to Newcastle, or perhaps more appositely steam engines to Birmingham. I don’t need to tell this assembled group what the humanities are and why they matter. But this question is asked increasingly loudly in the wider world. And we are not, as yet, answering it to the satisfaction of all of those asking.

It’s fair to say that our subjects have often needed to argue their case. The British Academy was established in 1902, to give the so-called ‘Literary Sciences’ a place at the table in the new International Association of Academies. The case had to be made to the scientists at the Royal Society and in similar organisations across Europe, where there was some scepticism, but I’m happy to report that the Royal Society supported the British Academy’s petition for a Royal Charter, and we did become members of the International Association after all. Twelve decades on, the Academy definitely has a place at various policy and international tables, but in very different economic, social and political conditions to those facing our predecessors at the turn of the last century.

Student numbers are dropping across the humanities, and not only in the UK. As we know, the financial resilience of the university sector is being steadily eroded, and humanities courses and faculties are bearing the brunt of the cuts which university leaders are having to make. We are sadly seeing this play out in real time, with around fifty Universities being forced to cut provision through course closures or job losses, often in the humanities. Some parts of the press revel in deriding humanities research as ‘woke’ and as either pointless or illegitimate. Things are not all bad - research funding for infrastructures to support research and development in the creative industries and in conservation has increased significantly in recent years, for example through the AHRC’s Creative Clusters and RiCHES programme, though its core budget remains minimal. But I don’t need to tell you all that we are at a critical juncture, and no speech on the humanities in a changing world can ignore this sobering situation.

In order to arrest the decline, many things need to be done. The model of university funding for teaching and research needs to be urgently revisited, but exactly who within this government or the next is willing to take responsibility for the current situation is far from clear. Universities are told to sort themselves out, but their ability to do so is hampered by the limits set by government (including in the devolved nations) on the fees they can charge home students, on the level of costs they will enable funders to cover for research, and on the Home Office’s immigration policy. Indeed, it is not at all clear who believes that the sector’s financial resilience is its problem at all.

The UK can rightly be proud of the research and teaching of humanities in our universities. One of the unique hallmarks of the UK’s research base is that we are strong across all the disciplines, both SHAPE and STEM, whether as measured in [QS rankings](#) or as recipients of European research funding. I would also argue that a thriving humanities landscape is a hallmark of a strong liberal democracy, where academic freedom and the right to critique are held as important values – as features, not bugs. When governments or leaders censoring the arts or humanities is, that is, for me, the ‘canary in the coal mine’; an early warning signal that the health of a democratic system is deteriorating.

But in the current context, when both public and private finances are strained, the fact that financial cuts are impacting the humanities shows that we need to re-energise support for them across the board – from students and government, to taxpayers and voters.

Ironically one group who don’t need convincing of the value of humanities students are employers, who consistently report that they want to build teams of people from a diverse set of disciplines, so they can benefit both from the different skills they bring and from their different ways of seeing the world. At the British Academy we undertook a large policy programme, called [SHAPE Skills](#). It showed that humanities graduates fuel some of the UK’s largest and fastest-growing sectors, including the creative and services industries which count for 81% of our economic output. And we know that of the ten fastest growing sectors, eight of them employ more graduates from the SHAPE disciplines than from those of STEM. SHAPE graduates are also, just as likely to retain their jobs during a period of downturn, or be able to change careers.

But sadly these facts do not seem to cut through strongly enough, either to students, those advising them on their careers, or to politicians. Back in the founding days of the British Academy, politicians and future prime ministers were readily putting their name to the Charter which established our existence. Now we are faced with a large part of the political community who don't see research or education in the humanities as a legitimate thing to fund or to support.

It can be exhausting to have to regularly jump to the defence of our subjects amid a slew of criticism, feeling the weight of the hard sell to people who deride them as low value.

We could dismiss the criticisms as just an example of the so-called 'culture wars', and as such so clearly 'wrong' that they are not worth engaging with. But as scholars who define our purpose as the pursuit of understanding people and societies, we should not be satisfied with such a glib response. We *should* ask ourselves: *who* is questioning the value of humanities, *why*, and *what would it take* to convince them?

In terms of *who* is asking the question, it's a broad church. Students, and their parents or guardians, deciding which path to take. Vice Chancellors and their top teams faced with declining income and rising costs. Politicians and their advisors analysing the country's - very strained - public sector finances. Journalists looking for an angle. Members of the public reading the news. Voters and taxpayers who see our public services deteriorating around us and wonder what their money is being spent on.

Expressed that way, the 'why' becomes clearer. So what would it take to convince them? The difficulty is that different people need different answers. So the challenge for us as a community is – how can we get such heterogenous 'publics' on side? How can we show them that the humanities not only matter but are vital to a prosperous, healthy and enriched society, and indeed to them as individuals?

Many of us, I'm sure, have sat around tables wondering how to answer those questions, and had varying success in the answers we've come up with. In what follows, I suggest that we start not from what is it we want to say, but from a closer analysis of what is it that people need to hear to be convinced that humanities have a valued role to play in our society.

In my own scholarship, one of the questions I ask is why is it that people (usually in my case organisations) accept that they should change their behaviour in response to the dictates of a regulator, particularly non-state regulators. The answer lies in notions of trust, legitimacy and authority. I don't want to go so far here to argue that the challenge humanities faces is completely analogous – but rather to explore whether the concept of legitimacy is remotely useful in analysing what questions different groups in society are asking, implicitly or explicitly, when they ask, 'What is the value of humanities?', and if so how they might be answered.

In the regulatory context, in order to gain, retain and indeed regain legitimacy, I have argued that regulators need to respond to the ‘legitimacy demands’ which are made by various ‘legitimacy communities’ – ie those groups on who acceptance the organisation relies in order to survive. Critically, those groups are both internal to the regulator, and external to it. Internally, they are members, employees, trustees and so forth. Externally, they are the regulated, political leaders, and multiple different societal groups or ‘publics’, with fluidity of membership across them.

Each ‘legitimacy community’ has different demands, or put differently, different or reasons for accepting the regulator as legitimate. Legitimacy might lie in the normative values the organisation is pursuing – so climate change, conservation, safety. Or there may be a deeper normative commitment – that the value of the organisation is unquestioned or seen as self-evident. A second set of legitimacy criteria relate to the manner in which the activities are conducted. In the legal or quasi-legal context of regulation these centre on what can be described in legal shorthand as - ‘rule of law’ values, ie adherence to values of transparency, due process, fairness. A third group of demands or criteria centre on opportunities for democratic participation in decision making. And the final group of demands revolve around the functional effectiveness of the organisation or wider system – does it work, is it effective (by some other set of criteria).

The challenge for any organisation or group has in responding in order to maintain its legitimacy, is that the ‘legitimacy demands’ made by the various ‘legitimacy communities’ are not necessarily aligned – it is impossible to satisfy all of the people all of the time, so the group has to choose who to respond to and who it can afford to ignore - and yet still survive. A further challenge is that legitimacy communities exist inside and outside the organisation – and what might be necessary to satisfy some internal communities is not what is needed to satisfy those outside, and vice versa.

How would this analysis of legitimacy translate into the context of ‘the humanities’ – or more precisely for the purpose of this talk, the practices of education and research in the humanities in the context of universities? To whose ‘legitimacy claims’ do those in the humanities need to respond, and why?

The ‘who’ in this context are framed as the different legitimacy communities. We can discuss precisely who they are, but in broad terms each legitimacy community includes students, their parents / carers / teachers, politicians, the media, employers, university senior management teams, academic researchers, funders, taxpayers – it’s an exhausting but non-exhaustive list.

What of the different criteria for legitimacy, or to put another way, the ‘legitimacy demands’ which are being made by these different groups? How might those translate into the context of humanities?

Before I go on I should say that several caveats apply – in a relatively short speech the analysis is going to have to be fairly perfunctory, but do stay with me, and hopefully the reasons why I’m taking you down this path will soon become evident – or at least by the end!

Firstly, the ‘normative’ value of humanities

Normatively based legitimacy derives from an acceptance of the goals the organisation is pursuing, or can be deeper and be an unquestioning acceptance of an institution which is so deep rooted it is not seen to require justification. For a person of faith, religion would have such a value.

The analogous argument in the context of research and education in the humanities is probably what is often termed the intrinsic value of the pursuit of knowledge, and more specifically, for pursuit of knowledge and understanding of humans and humanity across time and across place. For those making claims based in normative values, the value research and education in the humanities is self-evident and endures through time and context.

Claims based in the intrinsic value of research and education of humanities will resonate to anyone ‘inside’ the practice of humanities within academia. The question is how many other communities accept it as a justification, both inside and outside academia. The answer seems to be, ‘not as many as we would like’ and indeed ‘not as many as are needed’.

Even explaining what the humanities are to a mainstream audience – and in our 24/7 media and social media age, an audience with limited time and attention - is a significant challenge. And even if the value of understanding *humanity* is accepted, we know from the tenor of much public discourse that the value of pursuing a degree in *humanities* or in funding research into it is not seen to have such intrinsic value.

If this analysis is remotely correct, it would suggest that we need constantly to reinforce the fundamental connection between *humanity* and the *humanities*. Now is an opportune time to make that connection as the explosion of AI into public consciousness and use prompts fundamental questions on the nature of humanity to expand beyond the confines of academic conferences and into public discourse. The increase in geopolitical tensions which have their roots in tangled histories, clashes of cultures, religions and identities; the role of expression, fiction and narrative in helping us make sense of emotions and events; the role of understandings of people, culture and societies not just in critique but in the construction of new paths forward – all of these are matters for the humanities can tackle. Humanities scholars are and should be at the forefront of those debates, emphasising in a positive and constructive way what is intrinsically valuable about understanding the nature of humanity.

The second set of legitimacy demands are concerned with adherence to a core set of values in the way the activity is practiced

There is a strong strand of socio-legal work which demonstrates that people are more likely to accept a decision or outcome which goes against them if they judge that the process for

making that decision has been fair and transparent, and in accordance with norms of due process. What are the values demanded for the way research and education is practiced generally, and in the humanities in particular?

We could spend a long time exploring this question, but for the sake of argument, and brevity, I suggest the equivalent set of criteria by which research and education are judged relate to quality – a difficult term, and one which is contested within as well as outside the academy, as indeed are ‘rule of law’ values. As I said, we can explore what they may be in more detail, but for now let’s call them standards of pedagogy, and standards of research quality and integrity.

When it comes to education, the skills people learn in studying humanities – of critical analysis, interpretation, narrative, communication and more - are routinely termed ‘soft’ skills. In the current political climate, the accusation of ‘low quality’ courses is levelled at humanities, often with little or no evidence to support the claim. In contrast, [research](#) for the British Academy shows that humanities students, more than those in the social and other sciences, felt their education had imparted critical thinking, independence and a global-mindset – inarguably critical skills in an age of misinformation, bias, vested interests and global interconnectedness.

Turning to research, what constitutes [research integrity](#) is of course a matter of debate. But the Committee on Research Integrity’s principles are a good place to start. Research should be conducted honestly, with research goals clearly defined, methods being clearly explained, transparency about sources and uses of data, appropriate use and acknowledgement of others’ research, and making justifiable interpretations or claims based on research findings. It should be conducted with rigour and with respect for the research record, and in ways which ensure care and respect for participants and beneficiaries, including as relevant for cultural objects and the environment. Finally, all of those involved in research – funders, employers, researchers – have a responsibility to ensure an empowering and enabling research environment. Such an environment includes, I would add, upholding for values of equity, diversity and inclusion (though we know that others argue that EDI values are diametrically opposed to those of ‘quality’ or ‘rigour’).

I want to pause for a moment on the notion of ‘rigour’. The increased focus on ‘rigour’ in research poses humanities with a risk, but also an opportunity. We know that a criticism of humanities education and research is that they are ‘hobby’ subjects - something people can do in their leisure time. Research into history, literature, philosophy or cultures is seen by critics as being subjective or lacking rigour, of being politically motivated or indeed ‘woke’.

Those practicing research and education in the humanities know the criticisms are misplaced. But understanding the claim, and its connection to legitimacy, underscores the need to meet the critics on their own terms, to draw out how research in the humanities embodies and upholds the principles of research integrity and to find different ways to ‘show the workings’, as it were, of the practices of humanities education and research. This involves

demonstrating that good research and scholarship are about formulating questions and finding answers – it is not about the selective use of evidence to prove a previously determined view.

So addressing the demands of legitimacy communities which are focused on the manner in which research is conducted, I would argue, requires humanities to take ownership of what constitutes ‘rigorous research’ in the humanities, and to explain why, for example, ‘reproduceability’ is not always a meaningful criteria by which research quality, and in particular research integrity, can and should be defined. We need to be much clearer about explaining what standards of ‘knowledge production’ (or methodologies) are used in the humanities, and why they should be seen as producing knowledge and interpretations which should be recognised as valid.

Third, openness to participation

In the regulatory context (at least in a liberal democracy), openness to participation means accordance to broad sets of democratic values, which in turn means ability of those affected by the decisions of regulators to participate in some way in the decisions being made.

The analogy in an academic context is, at its broadest, is openness to participation – participation in education, and participation either in the practice of research and / or in learning from the insights of those who have conducted research.

In terms of access and accessibility, perhaps an outdated idea remains that the humanities are the preserve of the cultured, the educated, the elite – that they are a luxury, far removed from the daily life of many. But this is simply not true in today’s world. Only 23% of those [studying](#) design, creative or the performing arts come from what are termed in social statistics as the ‘higher managerial and professional occupations’; with 31% of those studying humanities and languages coming from that group (about the same as those studying the natural or built environment). In contrast, 40% of those studying medicine, dentistry or veterinary science come from the higher managerial and professional occupations.

Openness also means accessibility to the insights of research. The move from ‘pay to read’ to ‘pay to publish’ in academic publishing does cause challenges for humanities, particularly with respect to monographs. But there are other ways to make research accessible, and the humanities are strong in engaging the public in disseminating the insights from research. An excellent example is the work being done to revitalise and grow the UK’s minority languages. Researchers in Wales contributed towards the Geiriadur Prifysgol Cymru, an online Welsh language dictionary and mobile app, which was used more than 3 million times by Welsh Learners. The creation of the Electronic Dictionary of the Irish Language [received](#) nearly 3,400,000 million page views over the last five years.

But as we know, inclusion is not just about broadcasting for others to listen, it is about co-creation and active participation. Engaging more people in the activity of research also helps humanities ‘show its workings’, as it were – demonstrate just what the practice of ‘rigorous’ research involves. Here again great strides are being made. There are countless inspiring and

impactful examples of inclusive research across the UK research landscape and internationally – many of which have been set up in response to current challenges and to meet the needs of evolving social concerns and attitudes.

Take a collaboration between British Library and the Barbados Department of Archives, through the Endangered Archives Programme. It [digitised](#) and made public thousands of articles from 19th century Barbados newspapers.

The reason? A crowdsourcing drive, inviting people from all over the world to identify – through a swipe of their smartphone - brave acts of resistance by enslaved people, which were previously hidden away in fugitive adverts and runaway notices. This global public engagement drive has allowed people to trace and document courageous acts of rebellion by people – in some cases, their own ancestors – who were victims of enslavement and whose lives are not otherwise in the history books.

And a programme funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council to bring the public into dialogue about the past, present and future of the NHS to mark its 75th birthday. That project has collected and archived oral testimonies from NHS doctors, nurses and medical workers about their experiences during the Covid-19 pandemic – set to be a crucial resource for researchers and storytellers of the future.

Humanities research and public involvement benefit and enrich one another, deepening knowledge for scholars and enhancing public perception of the relevance and impact of our disciplines, through participation. That participation very often involves and mobilises whole communities, not just individuals.

And, when it comes to public participation, we cannot overlook the ways in which the humanities enrich and enhance the public facing arts. Consider the historical research that goes into a new theatre production or film - Birmingham in particular stands out with its exceptional resources for theatre research, not to mention this University's links with the industry.

Openness also includes openness to working with those from other disciplines. The British Academy's [Connected Knowledge](#) work, highlighting impactful and pioneering research collaborations between the STEM and SHAPE disciplines shows just how much can be achieved when they work together. I was at the British Academy lecture at Kew Gardens last night, where multidisciplinary teams from across the botanical sciences, humanities and the social sciences are working together, understanding the past and present in order to provide a stronger future for ourselves and the planet – a theme echoed in Birmingham's own project on monocultures in organic farming, for example.

AI is another growing area of interdisciplinary research, again represented here in Birmingham and elsewhere. Health is a further area where collaborations between those working in SHAPE and STEM disciplines can be particularly fruitful. One of our Connected Knowledge stories which I found particularly moving is the collaboration between design

researchers, technologists and health professionals who worked together – quite unexpectedly – to create a sensory doll which is having remarkable impacts on improving quality of life for people living with advanced dementia. Initially resistant to the concept of “play” and “happiness” as a way to treat those living with this condition, the medical profession has now embraced the HUG doll, and it is now being trialled by the NHS in clinical contexts as an alternative to anti-anxiety drugs.

The final group of criteria centre on relevance and functionality - it is functional, and does it deliver for individuals and for the greater good of society?

Referring back again to the context of regulatory governance, such organisations are created to achieve a particular purpose, and for many legitimacy communities their legitimacy comes from how well they are perceived to have achieved that purpose.

For many inside outside the academy, their acceptance of the value of research and higher education in general, and different disciplinary areas in particular, is based on whether they are relevant and useful in a changing world.

However, it is here that the dissonance between the criteria between various internal and external legitimacy communities is possibly the greatest. I recognise that for some, indeed, many academics, requirements to demonstrate impact or utility of research and education are particularly frustrating, especially when the demand is to show value in economic terms. Academics would often prioritise the normative criteria of intrinsic value over the instrumental and functional criteria of relevance and usefulness. We can, do and should contest the criteria for assessing relevance or usefulness, and argue for wider impacts on society and the environment to be included. But to be entirely deaf to the claims of multiple legitimacy communities on whose support we rely for our survival is a brave strategy indeed.

And humanities have an excellent case to make to such communities. There are multiple ways to show how the humanities are playing their part to tackle the big issues of the day, many of which are being demonstrated here at Birmingham - -from AI to health, from the environment to inequalities, from peacekeeping and conflict resolution to countering misinformation and reinforcing the fundamental pillars of democracy.

We need to shout about this – and whilst we might not like it, that is about being vocal, fleet of foot and reactive to the issues that matter to people and to the cultural zeitgeist. It is about ensuring that we can lend our expert voices to the stories breaking on any given day. We should also be playing a confident and active role in shaping agendas, not only providing critique but offering constructive thinking on how people and societies can navigate their way through these very troubled and troubling times,

What is the British Academy doing?

So what are we doing, as the British Academy, to make the case for the humanities and to mobilise them to a range of audiences?

We have and will continue to liaise closely with Government, politicians, civil servants and beyond, to showcase the vital work of our disciplines and shore up their health. And we will continue to speak out, in the media, and to the sector, about what must happen to protect our subjects and stop the dire situation we are in spiralling any further. Indeed, now that we are hurtling speedily towards a general election, we have set out exactly what action the next government must take, some of which I have spoken about here – but all of which is set out in our [Manifesto for the SHAPE Subjects](#), which you can read on our website. We have three main asks, all of which are key to the humanities:

1. Supporting an educational system that is sustainable, sparks creativity and offers opportunities to all;
2. Using insights and evidence from all subjects and disciplines to address society's biggest challenges;
3. Recognising the value of the international nature of our research and higher education system

Our manifesto requests build on the work we do each day, in advocating for the humanities, across the all elements of the research system: infrastructure, funding, evaluation, and understandings of research culture and integrity.

In these last few minutes, let me look at the work of the Academy through the framework I have just set out to show how we are striving to both shape and address the 'legitimacy demands' I have been talking about.

First, with respect to support for the intrinsic values of humanities, we support this through funding discovery research – research which is not linked to any 'missions' or challenges which we as a funder define, but rather is conducted purely because there is value in gaining greater understanding, about people, societies and cultures through time and across place, including our interactions with the planet.

As a funder, we have awarded around £125million to UK-based researchers over the past five years. Our schemes are numerous and designed to ensure we are supporting scholars across all levels of their career, as well as funding contained research projects. They include Postdoctoral Fellowships, Mid-Career Fellowships, Senior Research Fellowships, Small Research Grants, Academy Research Projects, and from 2021-22, Innovation Fellowships and Talent Development Awards.

In our funding for international fellowships and research collaborations, we have given our over £70 million in funding over the past five years, through over 500 awards. This includes the period when ODA funding was dramatically cut by the current government, and this year the position is considerably improved, and we have £56m to award.

In addition, through the Researchers at Risk scheme, which we run in conjunction with the other Academies and the Council for At Risk Academics, funded by the UK Government and others, we have supported 179 Ukrainian academics – 48 of whom are humanities scholars - to continue their work across 70 UK institutions. We are continually making the case to government for more funding to enable the scheme to be expanded to researchers at risk globally.

With respect to the ways in which research is conducted, as I mentioned earlier, there can too often be assumptions that research is itself a monoculture, with us all operating across the disciplines in the same way. But a lone researcher using multiple types of sources – textual, visual, material, oral - to uncover hidden knowledge of another time or another culture, is as removed from the visual artists working in the creative industries as they are from team of scientists in the lab. And so while we share the same values – rigour, integrity, excellence – we must adopt and communicate our own understandings and applications of them. This message is just one that we at the Academy have been striving to cement in the workings of UKRI, the research concordats, the Committee on Research Integrity, and in the strategies and frameworks of government.

On EDI, the Academy's commitment to strengthening equality, diversity and inclusion in research is core to our strategy. Our trial of partial randomisation in how we allocate Small Research Grants is blazing a trail of innovation in the UK research funding landscape, with early results showing increased diversity in awardees – regionally, institutionally and across ethnicity, as well as a significant increase in applicants, particularly from younger scholars. A new fund to support additional needs for grant holders and applicants, such as childcare, is serving a clear need, helping create better equity among the researchers we support. Our funding of the EDI Caucus is expanding the evidence base on best practice in inclusivity in UK research and innovation,

We are also working hard to **open up the Academy in various ways**.

One way we are pursuing this objective is to offer support to early career researchers across the UK by enabling them to connect with one another, to access advice, support, and mentoring and to help them develop wider networks outside academia. The Network has enjoyed an extraordinarily successful pilot phase, with almost 4,000 researchers signed up. The Midlands and mid-Wales consortium is led by the University of Nottingham, Coventry University and University of Lincoln. In the next year, we will publish our new EDI strategy, which brings together this work and more to articulate our organisational-wide ambitions, under the pillars of our Strategic Plan.

We are also growing our programme of public engagement, conceived to connect scholars, students, specialists and curious minds with the best and brightest ideas the Humanities and Social Sciences have to offer. Our new event spaces will open this Autumn, enabling us to put on a significantly enhanced programme of events, both in person and digitally. The programme will be seasonal, and we are opening with the themes of 'The Age of Mistrust?' And 'Folklore Reimagined'. Through these and more to come we have a brilliant opportunity

to show the public the ways in which the humanities intersect with almost every topic one can think of.

We have also been taking the our annual lectures ‘on tour’ around the UK, and in the past year we have delivered Lectures in partnership with 14 universities and independent research organisations, such as Kew, as I mentioned earlier. From the *History of African and Caribbean People in Britain* by Professor Hakim Adi, to *The Future of Music Studies* by Professor Tamara Levitz, and Booker Prize winning author Bernadine Evaristo on why the *Art of the African Diaspora is for Everyone* – our lectures showcase the diversity of the humanities, and how they underpin our past, present and future.

And each year we throw open our doors for our Summer Showcase, a free public festival of the SHAPE subjects. It celebrates the inspiring array of research that we fund with a packed programme of free exhibits, talks and interactive workshops. It is always a busy and buzzing weekend, and for me, a source of great cheer and optimism to witness the Academy’s home filled with an engaged and questioning public, including school age learners.

As well as our own festival, for a number of years we have joined forces with the AHRC and the School of Advanced Study to deliver the Being Human Festival, the UK’s national festival of the Humanities, to bring the best of the subjects to national and international audiences.

Further, through our research funding the Academy has been trialling a new grant to support two-way engagement between SHAPE researchers and the public, through collaboration with museums, galleries, libraries and archives. The sheer creativity and diversity of the proposals we received in this first pilot year has been absolutely inspiring. From an investigation into how landscape shapes cultural identities through the lens of Birmingham’s iconic No. 11 bus route, to engaging school students with the forgotten histories of Black prisoners of war in an English castle – we are hugely proud to be supporting humanities scholars to work with communities and community institutions to bring their work to a wider public, including under-served audiences.

I must also mention the relaunch of our Journal of the British Academy, which I have here – a new, open access Journal which features insights, articles, commentaries from our Fellows, lectures and funded researchers. All contributions are peer reviewed, but they are designed to be accessible to non-specialist readers. And, although I have a print copy here, it is deliberately designed to be read digitally, with several pieces embedding film and other media within them, providing examples of how the digital transformation of humanities enables the creation of new knowledge through new methodologies.

Finally, we strive to demonstrate that humanities are not just relevant but critical to society through both our funded research, and through our public policy work. We recently undertook a significant piece of policy work called [*The Covid Decade*](#) in response to a direct ask by Sir Patrick Vallance, the-then Government Chief Scientific Advisor. It looked

in detail at the long-term implications of the pandemic on society across a whole range of factors – from communities, culture and wellbeing to employment and education, and we followed it up with roundtables in departments across the government.

Through our current policy themes we are mobilising the humanities to connect policymakers and international partners with insights on range of topical and pressing issues. Our current areas of focus are: global order and disorder; sustainability and just transitions; social and cultural infrastructures; a good digital society (we were one of only four organisations to host roundtable events ahead of the UK's AI Safety Summit last year, directly informing the Summit itself). We also recently completed [a report](#) for the Prime Minister's Council on Science and Technology on how to bolster public trust in science when it intersects with politics and policy. And this is in addition to the work we have been doing to [promote](#) the learning of modern languages.

In all our policy related work we emphasise that utility to society extends well beyond contributions to economic growth, or indeed salary levels of graduates. The Academy's commissioned research on REF Impact Case Studies, for example – which as we know are a particular way of analysing impact – identified 8 areas of impact in addition to the economy and employment. Research into arts, literature and design, history and cultural heritage, is making an impact at all levels from the local to the geo-political. Humanities and social science research is [helping](#) address crime and exclusion, enhance health and wellbeing, and support the drive to sustainability- all ways in which humanities is helping people and societies to prosper.

So, to summarise

Humanities are transformative, and indeed are transforming, but they are doing so in the face of some strong political and economic headwinds. I have taken the possibly unlikely path of drawing on the notion of legitimacy and the demands of legitimacy communities – both internal and external to academia - to examine how humanities might counter some of the challenges it faces in demonstrating its value, and indeed to show why humanities should and must survive and thrive.

Humanities have for us an intrinsic value which is self-evident, but equally legitimacy may depend on the values and principles according to which humanities research and education is practiced, its openness and accessibility, and importantly for many, the practical utility of humanities education and research and its contribution to individual and social prosperity. We may rail against those who demand always that we show the utility of humanities to the economy or society. But I hope I have also demonstrated that we can and should be helping to frame those demands – to define what methods and values are appropriate for humanities; what openness means in their context, and the wide range of contributions they can and do make to society – as well as demonstrate how humanities can and is meeting them. And I have endeavoured to show how we at the British Academy are seeking to do exactly that.

I spoke at the beginning of my remarks about Professor Diarmaid MacCulloch's excellent blog, *What are the humanities?*

So, I will leave you with one of his insights from within it: "You can't weigh wisdom or take a measuring-tape to it; but without it, humanity will be annihilated. Never assume that the humanities are an optional extra, a bit of leisure-time fun, alongside the real hard-nosed human business of science, medicine or engineering."

The humanities are not an optional extra and in this changing world we need them more than ever. We need to understand who is asking questions about their value and their relevance – and we need to know how to communicate and reach those different communities on whom we rely for support, and indeed our legitimacy.

Thank you.