

PARTICLE PHYSICS NEEDS POETS



Expert view
To focus higher education funding on science and technology is to neglect the key role of culture in interpreting the world, says Geoffrey Crossick

These are worrying times for the arts and humanities. Ringfencing funding for science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) subjects after last year's Research Assessment Exercise took significant money away from the arts and humanities.

The government's instruments of knowledge transfer rest on a model ill-adapted to the creative economy. And, as recession has bitten, government's belief that science and technology subjects offer the graduates and research that the country needs in tough times has strengthened. The

10,000 additional university places created in July were limited to students studying STEM subjects and business.

Research and teaching in science and engineering is of great importance, but the emphasis on them at the expense of the arts and humanities is a serious mistake. For a start, there is the economic importance of these subjects, which provide the graduates and the ideas that have made the creative industries the fastest-growing part of the UK economy, and an employer of two million people.

The creative industries need the imagination and energy nurtured in a vibrant cultural sector to make them succeed. The vitality of art and music, galleries and museums, dance and theatre isn't just important for the creative and thoughtful society we all want, it is also good for the economy. They do this through the creative industries, and also through tourists – who consistently cite the cultural scene as one of their most important reasons for visiting this country. Without the work of humanities researchers – art historians, archaeologists and the like – our great museums would become dull and their exhibitions uninteresting.

The economy, and a vibrant cultural scene, are thus inextricably linked. And the fact that in recession attendance at museums, galleries and cultural events has risen in the UK, as it has in France and the US, should make us think about the broader support they give to a thoughtful and cohesive society.

A few years ago, when I was chief executive of the Arts and Humanities Research Board, we established a research programme on diasporas, migration and identities. Its aim was to look at migrations of people, and how identities take shape in different places, at different times, and in different types of religious and ethnic settings. Issues long addressed by arts and humanities researchers are now fundamental to understanding security and cohesion in the contemporary world. No wonder the Home Office's chief scientific adviser has consistently supported the programme.

This is just one example of how the arts and humanities contribute to the government's major strategic challenges. Whether we're talking about global security and terrorism, economic innovation, health and ageing, the digital economy or the way people face up to climate change, none of these challenges can be addressed without the arts and humanities. All would be so much easier if people were not bundles of complexity, shaped by their language, identities, histories, faiths and cultures. The humanities explore just that complexity, which makes them indispensable to the economic, social and public policy questions at the heart of government priorities.

But let's not think that the knowledge which matters is defined only by immediate priorities. Imagine a society which had little understanding of its own literature and history, its own languages and culture, and its own ways of thinking, and even less

understanding of those of the rest of the world.

And then there is the sense of wonder. The Staffordshire Hoard, the breathtaking recent find of 1,500 gold and silver Anglo-Saxon artefacts, was made sense of by

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the archaeologists and historians who unravelled its meaning. Just a week earlier, astronomers working on images from the newly refurbished Hubble Space Telescope took us back 13 billion years to show us galaxies just 600 million years after the Big Bang. Were either of these of any practical use? No. Yet the public excitement showed how much both touched us.

It is not that science subjects are useful and the arts and humanities a luxury. Both contribute to economic wellbeing, good public policy and the wider quality of life. And both contribute new knowledge that has the astonishing capacity to evoke a sense of awe and wonder that is fundamental to our humanity. •

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