Reinventing the Humanities:
A brief introduction to the ‘Transcultural Challenges and Technology’ and ‘Medical Humanities’ panels

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The Humanities appear to have fallen out of favour. Whereas the public benefits of Business Studies and the STEM subjects remain beyond doubt, the Humanities are seen as a gratuitous, barely justifiable luxury that, both as individuals and as nations, we can no longer afford. Even though it is acknowledged that the Humanities make a contribution to cultural life and indeed strengthen our sense of who (we think) we are, some accounts suggest that Humanities subjects have drastically decreased in demand www.telegraph.co.uk/education/universityeducation/clearing/10238399/University-fee-rise-sparks-surge-in-demand-for-jobs-based-degrees.html, while others demonstrate that the Humanities continue to have real economic value http://blogs.lse.ac.uk/impactofsocialsciences/2013/08/02/a-good-humanities-degree-has-real-value/. What is it to be?

The Humanities are about people, both as individuals and collectively, and we will all agree that there’s very little humans find more compelling than the lives of other humans. The Humanities ask questions about society, history, communication, relationships, thought, culture and creativity – all things that continue to make the world go around, sometimes in unison, sometimes in apparent competition with that other proverbial globe-spinner. So how could we assume for even a second that the Humanities have somehow come a cropper?

Is there any truth in claims that the viability of the Humanities has decreased because they are set in their incorrigibly quaint and antiquated ways? That the Humanities have become estranged from the modern world and struggle to adapt to life in the twenty-first century? That they aren’t good value for money? Who could possibly be more concerned about the effect on people’s lives brought about by scientific and technological progress, the fluctuations of the market, and their ‘unintended consequences’ than the Humanities? The Humanities ceaselessly probe what it means to be human in times of change. Who is more keenly preoccupied with society’s problems? Far from incapable of change, several
Humanities fields are undergoing significant hybridisation with technology, science and business: the medical humanities, ecocriticism, animal studies, the digital humanities – to name but a few. At MMU alone examples of innovative cross-disciplinary collaboration abound. Human geographers work with town planners and urban designers to examine the changing experience of life in the city generated by new lighting technologies. Poets explore the communal significance of industrial ‘edgelands’ as tourist attractions and newly emergent spaces of leisure and recreation. Literary historians produce maps in the form of smartphone apps aimed at tourists walking in the footsteps of Romantic and Victorian poets. Sociologists trace the history of garbage and its changing place in people’s lives. Researchers in global business and politics learn from literary critics about how the world is imagined in best-selling fiction and film, and how we struggle to uphold the myth of individualism in a world inhabited by over 7 billion people.

It seems to me that if the Humanities are indeed confronting a major challenge in the twenty-first century, then it is to increase public awareness of what they do and why it matters. We must ensure that what we have to say, and how we say it, makes sense, and is captivating and relevant. This may necessitate a radical emancipation of our disciplines from the sour chic of postmodernist relativity and the turgid grandiloquence of ‘theory’. We must re-engage the people in what we know, what we’re worried about, and what we’re interested in. It seems absurd that we’re now in a situation where we have to ‘save’ the Humanities. The Humanities shouldn’t need saving. They already have what it takes. They are fascinating, and due to their societal relevance and topicality, public engagement ought to be coming naturally to them. They shouldn’t need special re-popularising campaigns because, by definition, the Humanities are concerned with the life of the public, with people, with society. And yet of late the Humanities have doubtless become a case for special pleading – hence this very introduction to two special panels on “Reinventing the Humanities”: a panel on “Transcultural Challenges and Technology”, led by researchers from MMU’s Department of Languages, Information and Communication, and a panel on “Medical Humanities”, led by researchers from English and Philosophy.

The rationale underpinning our two “Reinventing the Humanities” panels is this:

The core focus of the Humanities – “the human”, human living, human being – is intimately affected by scientific and technological progress. Equally, any long-term sustainable adoption
of scientific and technological solutions is ultimately dependent on human factors and social context. Broad research questions therefore exist around the interplay between society and culture, on the one hand, and science, business and technology, on the other. (Indeed, effective future collaboration will depend on dispensing with this perceived polarity.) The importance of the Humanities shows itself when we ask questions like: how do advancements in science, technology and business affect what it is to be human? How does society change in response to such advancements? Or, put differently, how do we recognize and pre-empt so-called ‘unintended consequences’ of scientific, technological, medical and economic progress? (Please note that it’s the Humanities that have traditionally subjected the very concept of ‘progress’ to interrogation.) How do we deal with the ethical implications of the new science and technology? In light of these questions, the papers assembled here under the “Reinventing the Humanities” umbrella call for a more deliberate and pro-active integration of Humanities expertise in applied research agendas. The ultimate aim is to devise a roadmap for a universally beneficial production of knowledge that makes a genuine difference to contemporary society by mobilizing all the bodies of knowledge and methodological expertise currently at our disposal.

The challenge for the Humanities to reinvent themselves is twofold:

1. At times the Humanities appear too fond of adopting a stance of oppositional critique, and overcoming this often ideologically motivated detachment from Science and Technology will be crucial to enable full engagement in shaping future research agendas. In order to help determine the general direction of travel at both a European and global level, the Humanities must be prepared to come on board and fully collaborate.

2. The Humanities must confront the question of their contemporary utility. There is a tendency towards an autotelic defence (i.e. that their value is intrinsic and self-evident and that there is no need to justify their role or purpose), which ultimately imprisons the Humanities in the ivory tower of the University. As already indicated, one of the great challenges facing the Humanities in the twenty-first century is to increase public awareness of what it is they actually do, and why this has relevance for society.

One of the biggest barriers to fruitful collaboration across the traditional STEM/non-STEM divide is a lack of trust and faith in science, technology and business among Humanities scholars. The development of equal partnerships continues to be impeded by persistent
mutual prejudice, the Humanities being seen as purely theoretical while Science and Technology are seen as purely pragmatic, each claiming predominance over the other. Neither does it really signal much of a way forward to suggest that this apparent antagonism can generate a fruitful synergetic complementarity. Indeed the opposite is the case: it seems deeply unpropitious to regard theory and critical thought as exclusively the domain of the Humanities whilst seeing pragmatism and applied research as solely the domain of Science and Technology. It appears far more conducive to conceptualise their mutual complementarity in terms of their disciplinary differences in approach, that is, via a linking up of the Humanities’ mainly qualitative methodologies with Science and Technology’s mainly quantitative outlook. In any case, what is clear is that a lot of work remains to be done to facilitate fruitful collaborative research agendas that involve disciplines from across the full academic spectrum. This kind of collaboration will need to be actively promoted by newly emergent research programmes and consortia like CARPE and Horizon 2020, which aspire to a genuinely cross-disciplinary, or even post-disciplinary, research future.

Let me conclude with a very brief synopsis of how Applied Humanities research can contribute to broader research agendas in the twenty-first century. (These are points on which the papers that follow will elaborate in more detail.)

- Diagnosis and pre-emption of so-called ‘unintended consequences’ by anticipating the impact of Science and Technology research upon the individual, particular groups in society, society at large and the environment
- Evaluation of long-term sustainability by analysing how the research will affect ‘the human condition’ and necessitate, or inadvertently result in, behavioural and societal change
- Management of ethical implications accompanying scientific and technological progress, as well as economic and governmental policy
- Education in creativity to enhance the conceptual and imaginative skills society needs to adapt to progress and be prepared to tackle the unforeseeable
- Promotion of full democratic participation and responsible citizenship through the teaching of STEM literacy
- Recognition of the human as composed of both reason and affect
• Digital humanities: response to the ever-accelerating expansion of humanity’s experiential life-world; redefinition of Humanities’ objects of study, research tools and methods; pedagogical innovation