

20 November 2023

Statement re cuts to English, History, Film and the closure of Music at Oxford Brookes University

The Arts and Humanities Alliance is deeply concerned by news of imminent cuts, closures and consequent redundancies in arts and humanities disciplines at Oxford Brookes University and calls on the Board of Governors, the Vice-Chancellor, Professor Alisdair Fitt, and other members of the Senior Management Team to work together to revoke the immediacy of such changes and engage in constructive dialogue with the disciplines affected in order to develop sustainable solutions that are to the benefit of all concerned.

We recognise that any decisions will not have been made lightly and that much of the volatility in the Higher Education sector for arts and humanities disciplines has been brought about by the removal of the Student Numbers Cap and a funding model for home-fees-rated students that does not allow universities to make ends meet. Responsibility for these matters lies firmly with the Government. However, even in particularly difficult financial circumstances, we would like to emphasise the value of arts and humanities disciplines to society and thus the importance of their being available for study at the nation's universities.

Oxford Brookes's current challenges must be set against an understanding of what the loss of these subjects will mean for the University and the communities it serves. These include a loss of the capacity to imagine futures in light of an understanding of complicated, and often problematic, pasts; a loss of the capacity for critical thinking and creativity; and, with the closure of Music, the total loss of opportunity for higher level musical education for the diverse local demographic the University serves and a wider impoverishment of the cultural life of the area. Furthermore, all indicators point to the value of the arts and humanities to the global economy whatever the political rhetoric of the day. The World Economic Forum could not be clearer about the skills needed for the economies of the future, the majority of which are taught on humanities programmes, with critical thinking and problem-solving – core skills in the humanities – topping the list.¹ There is also wide recognition that the arts, humanities and social sciences are needed alongside the sciences to address the human-created challenges of our

¹ <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2020/10/top-10-work-skills-of-tomorrow-how-long-it-takes-to-learn-them/>.

time, and that an understanding of culture is the first step to change. Foremost among these challenges is AI. The importance of the humanities to address this challenge was clearly made by Andy Haldane, the former Chief Economist, Bank of England, in an interview on Sky News on 23 April 2023: 'What will protect us from the rise of AI is our creative capacity as human beings [...] we have seen the dwindling budgets for arts and humanities [...] that is a big mistake for the jobs and skills of the future'.²

We need our university leaders to honour the contributions made every year to national economies by arts and humanities graduates. We also need our university leaders to recognise the long-term social and economic consequences of allowing decline in these subject areas. In an ever more connected world that is facing unprecedented problems, we need university leaders to embrace more, not less, multidisciplinary, including with the subjects you are proposing to cut, which teach students 'to analyse, interpret, create, communicate and collaborate with rigour, clarity and energy'.³ The opportunities are summed up in a recent British Academy report: 'arts and humanities students are the "ideal entrepreneurs" of the future, digitally literate, ready to thrive in a globally diverse world, resilient, confident at analysis and team working, independently minded'.⁴

Given that Oxford Brookes's strategic vision is underpinned by a commitment to 'inclusivity, confidence, enterprising creativity, connectedness and generosity of spirit', we have confidence that an institution built on such foundations can easily work through its current difficulties, in full recognition of the value of the arts and humanities to its mission.

The image shows two handwritten signatures in blue ink. The signature on the left is 'Emma Cayley' and the signature on the right is 'Thea Pitman'.

Professors Emma Cayley and Thea Pitman
Co-chairs, Arts and Humanities Alliance

On behalf of the affiliates of the Arts and Humanities Alliance

<https://www.artsandhumanitiesalliance.org/>

And with thanks to Professor Jennifer Richards for research in relation to the value of arts and humanities disciplines.

² <https://news.sky.com/video/limiting-skilled-controlled-migrant-labour-is-a-mistake-says-ex-bank-of-england-chief-economist-12864152>

³ <https://www.thebritishacademy.ac.uk/this-is-shape/>

⁴ <https://www.thebritishacademy.ac.uk/publications/flagship-skills-right-skills-arts-humanities-social-sciences/>