

## In the name of employability

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DOI:

[10.1177/14740222231160409](https://doi.org/10.1177/14740222231160409)

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*Document Version*

Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

*Citation for published version (Harvard):*

Ashton, D, Bennett, D, Bulaitis, ZH & Tomlinson, M 2023, 'In the name of employability: Faculties and futures for the arts and humanities in higher education', *Arts and Humanities in Higher Education*, vol. 22, no. 2, pp. 103-111. <https://doi.org/10.1177/14740222231160409>

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# In the name of employability: Faculties and futures for the arts and humanities in higher education

Arts and Humanities in Higher Education  
2023, Vol. 22(2) 103–111  
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DOI: 10.1177/14740222231160409

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## Abstract

This introductory overview sets out the scope and aims of the special issue, which is concerned with establishing more meaningful understandings and discourses on the relationship between arts and humanities and graduate employability. The issue comes at a time of increased government-level questioning of the social and economic value of higher education (HE), and particularly humanities disciplines. The propositions developed in this introduction and the contributing authors' papers aim towards developing stronger and more meaningful engagement with the future place and role of arts and humanities within HE and wider society. We establish a variety of themes in the value of HE and make connections to the contributing authors' articles. We finish with critical questions for continued debate and research in the nexus between arts and humanities and graduate outcomes. These are all pertinent to the questions of value that underpin many of the papers in this issue.

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**Keywords**

Arts, humanities, higher education, employability, value

This special issue examines the faculties and futures of the arts and humanities within the context of a dynamic global labour market and ongoing higher education (HE) reforms in the twenty-first century. We asked contributors to consider three things: the role of the arts and humanities education within the context of work and society; visions and versions of employability that are invoked and responded to within the arts and humanities; and solutions which might enable the arts and humanities to regain or reframe their value. The articles included in this special issue provide new evidence and contemporary case studies of employability successes but also highlight ongoing barriers to better understanding graduate experiences and expectations from higher education. As the plural terms “arts” and “humanities” imply, there is no one-size-fits-all answer we offer. Yet, in a polyphonic collection of voices, emerges a shared refrain: arts and humanities researchers have much to offer to the employability debate, especially in terms of public value.

The preface of Bate’s 2011 edited collection *The Public Value of the Humanities* suggests that recession is a time for asking fundamental questions about value, and the contributors did just that with their reflections on the public value of arts and humanities disciplines. The editors designed the issue to give voice to arts and humanities scholars and practitioners who are redefining the value of the arts and humanities in HE and actively engaged in how to best articulate this in our changing world. The authors responded by examining the intricate connections and global challenges of the ongoing recession, pandemic, climate change, national populism, intersectional inequalities, and more.

Many of the questions concerning the value of arts and humanities centre on their utilitarian value and status in the economy. This invariably focuses attention on the role of these disciplines in generating private and collective economic returns and facilitating direct skills development, with attendant concerns over their capacity to deliver such outcomes. Like much of the narrative on the value of HE, concerns over the value of arts and humanities elide more nuanced understanding of the public value and potential social and economic trade-offs in pursuing these disciplines, which often feed into the wider benefits of HE (Hunt and Atfield, 2019). Moreover, discussions of the social and economic value of arts and humanities disciplines are often entwined in artificial dualisms between so-called ‘vocational’ and ‘academic’ goals, as well as false dichotomies between developmental and instrumental pursuits within HE itself. These distinctions were troubled as far back as Dewey (1939), who saw the pursuit of vocation as a legitimate and worthwhile educational aim and one not necessarily disconnected from intrinsic interest in the pursuit of knowledge and truth.

It was also timely to generate exposition and exchange on the idea of what the arts and humanities can offer (Reisz, 2020). As governments and HE institutions address the ongoing impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic and global security concerns, the value of a university degree remains a disputed and debated field. Graduate destinations and

employment outcomes have long been factored into the accounts of value and consequences when it comes to the role of HE arts and humanities (British Academy, 2017; Britton et al., 2022). At the same time, there has been considerable debate and reflection on the economic and social purposes of HE itself (McArthur, 2011). Within this issue, Comunian, Jewell, Sunmoni and Dent's article engages with graduate labour market data to investigate how these mechanisms capture the societal contribution made by arts and humanities graduates. To date, research has centred on individual graduate income and economic worth of degree programmes, but Comunian et al.'s fresh analysis recognises that arts and humanities graduates are more likely to engage in volunteer work and to engage with society, both actively and passively. These dimensions of societal contribution are overlooked in current graduate survey data and offer new ways to measure and articulate the value and values of arts and humanities education. A related area for further exploration is how to introduce and embed societal contributions within different types of graduate surveys and how to make this a conversation within HE, for example with the Directors of Learning and Teaching that McCormack and Baron engage with in their article in this special issue.

Multiple HE governmental policies identify the question of value with that of graduate employment. For example, Augar's (2020) interim response to the UK's "Post-18 Review of Education and Funding" highlighted that skills and jobs were the priority for government engagement in HE reform (DfE, 2021). The emphasis in the UK remains on 'strong graduate employment outcomes' (see Adams, 2020) and in Australia, as elsewhere, the focus remains 'job ready graduates' (Grattan, 2020). The terms of this discussion are reinforced in responses and reports from a range of scholarly and policy organisations; however, these reports raise an anomaly between the overt and the hidden curriculum, and student self-beliefs. The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), for example, signals both a mismatch between humanities degrees and the job skills required to secure work *and* a labour market shortage of skills associated with the humanities.

As well as accounting for the present context and societal challenges, our special issue makes space to explore faculties or attributes of the arts and humanities and consider potential futures within HE. In this way, we build on recent commentary including The Right Skills (2017) report and the British Academy's *Qualified for the Future* report (2020), which emphasise the employability of arts, humanities and social science graduates across a range of sectors and roles. The reports identify skills such as communication, collaboration, research and analysis, independence, creativity and adaptability. Ironically, De Dijn et al. (included in this issue) find that many humanities students are unable to recognise and articulate the skills they have developed, creating an unnecessary barrier between their skillset and potential employment opportunities.

Petrone (2018) and Van Nuys (2020) demonstrate that industry perspectives recognise the benefits of employees with skills learned and developed through critical thinking and creative activity. This resonates also with employer discourses around sought-after soft skills and behavioural competencies. The social and economic shifts prompted by the global pandemic will undoubtedly influence the skills that are most valued in the labour market. These emerging priority skills challenge the dominance of science, technology,

engineering and mathematics (STEM) from the labour market perspective. Ashton's contribution to this special issue explores the historical precedence and motivation underlying the STEM agenda as a preference within United Kingdom (UK) policy. Ashton considers how emerging and growing sectors of employment, including the creative economy and the emergence of Artificial Intelligence, require a reconsideration of priority skills towards communication, creativity, and collaboration, which an arts education can readily provide.

A limitation of the employability skills discourse is the emphasis on possession rather than articulation, or indeed (self) recognition. The dominant language in such discourse is both overtly economic and potentially exclusive, with normative assumptions of ability and desirability (Handely, 2018). A more purposeful framing is around *dispositions* (Barnett, 2017) which include a range of meta-cognitive, inter-cultural and socio-emotional abilities that help students engage more purposively with their environments. The article by Coffield, Markham, Crosby, Stenbom and Athanasiou shows that for Humanities graduates, the need to demonstrate 'employability skills' is often counter-productive, especially for less advantaged students who perceive themselves to be 'lacking' such immediate job readiness. Formal learning that encourages partnership, creative and critical pedagogic approaches within the humanities and beyond skills and consumer rights discourse has the scope to emancipate students towards more empowering dispositions and to enhance cultural capital that has genuine purchase in the cultural and creative industries.

Beyond discourses around skills development and the economic returns of arts and humanities graduates lie pressing issues around labour precariousness, both for graduates and educators. The protean career paths experienced by large sections of the workplace have become more readily internalised by students and graduates, who tend towards being more proactive and adaptable (Walsh and Gleeson, 2022). Such dispositions feature in many graduate career narratives from the cultural and creative industries (Bridgstock et al., 2015). This discourse relates also to salient dimensions of working life such as societal contribution, 'good work' (Hesmondhalgh and Baker, 2011), and the visions for a 'good life' (Oakley and Ward, 2018). Drawing on identity and community learning theories, Crone's paper addresses professional and pedagogic commitment within the humanities. There is a strong reference here to how individuals construct their value and self-worth even in conditions of enduring precariousness, further emphasising the need to replace skills discourses with those of labour value and identity. The implications for quality education in these disciplines are clear, as are the problematic paradoxes: how might humanities educators equip graduates to overcome precarity when they experience this in their own working lives?

Howells' (2011, p. 249) contribution to *The Public Value of the Humanities* explores the instrumental and intrinsic values of arts and humanities and suggests, 'we realize that the arts and humanities have their uses, but may at the same time interpret these as agreeable consequences rather than their *raison d'être*'. The balance between purpose and consequence is currently centre stage in multiple countries, leading to debates about whether entire disciplines belong in HE. The prioritisation of HE subject areas differs by country (Teixeira, 2021), but Costa's (2019) analysis of international political documents

highlights widespread devaluation of the Humanities. Not surprisingly, governmental devaluation can be traced to how universities value and support the arts and humanities, seen in the subsequent cuts to research and teaching and the closure of courses and departments. England (this issue) contends that the removal of craft from HE would threaten the innovation, growth, diversification and sustainability of craft economies. England's critique of dominant logics at the crossroads of HE and craft highlights the competition between employability development and craft curriculum alongside the inadequacy of graduate surveys which both fail to consider the time it takes to establish a career and focus on traditional, full-time jobs.

Engaging with Costa and focusing on humanities, arts and social science (HASS) in Australia, McCormack and Baron (this issue) return to the alignment of HASS funding with graduate employability. McCormack and Baron identify a gap in the influence of political employment-based decision-making on HASS programs and analyse the responses of academic staff. Their survey of directors of learning and teaching highlights the prevalence of news media debates around 'good' investment and the impact of this on enrolment, curriculum renewal, courses and departments. Looking ahead, the question of funding will remain central (Roberts, 2021) and current concerns will be exacerbated during times of economic uncertainty (Wicklow, 2022).

McCormack and Baron's contribution provokes debate on the *ways* in which employability is articulated and the tensions which emerge through its interpretation. It also highlights de Dijn et al.'s finding that students can not recognise and articulate their skills. Their study developed a tool to help students translate high-order labels into concrete descriptors of work-related skills. This is important because graduates who do not recognise their value to both society and the labour market are unable to explore and maximise their graduate careers. This work reinforces the importance of student self-perceptions (Dacre Pool and Sewell, 2007) in developing inner-value capitals such as self-awareness, self-esteem, self-efficacy and confidence (Baruch and Peiperl, 2000).

DeDijn et al.'s study demonstrates that employability development can be undertaken within the existing curriculum. In contrast, England's study highlights the typical separation of career development and creative practice which can push employability to the boundaries. Combined, the special issue papers highlight the potential for programmes in the arts and humanities to position employability at the core of a student's future practice: as a development of self, societal and career awareness on which meaningful work and career can be constructed.

The wider goal of this special issue is to provoke further discussion, debate, and critical questioning of the value of the arts and humanities and create meaningful reflections on their role in the economy and society, including in enriching graduates' lives and societal contributions. To this end, the following questions centre on the overarching, and pressing, issues around reappraising the value of arts and humanities both in relation to graduate employability the wider societal value of HE:

How can we arrive at a better set of measurements to engage graduate outcomes, as well as the economic value of humanities?

How can graduate outcome measures better engage with graduates' appraisal of their careers and job value given that many orientate towards the cultural and creative industries or may be propended towards portfolio careers?

How can more meaningful and sustainable discussions of graduate employability and vocational development be facilitated within arts and humanities disciplines given the skepticism towards such government-centred discourses?

Focusing on notions of job value and meaning, how might arts and humanities help inform graduates' understanding of economic and societal contribution?

How might we move beyond the 'two cultures' binary of STEM (Science Technology Engineering Mathematics) vs arts and humanities, and the residual and mythological framing of humanities as purely expressive pursuits that have limited vocational orientation?

In closing, this special issue calls on researchers in the arts and humanities to engage with employability narratives, adding their voice, expertise, and experience to those we have featured here.

### **Declaration of conflicting interests**

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

### **Funding**

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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