

# Reinvigorating the Humanities at the UWI to Create Exciting Futures and Vibrant Societies

---

GLENFORD D. HOWE AND HALIMA-SAADIA KASSIM

OVER THE PAST FEW DECADES THE TEACHING AND IMAGE of various subject areas in the humanities have been experiencing serious challenges at many colleges and universities across the globe. This problem has been compounded by government policies in some countries which may be overtly or more subtly antithetical to the existence of the humanities. In other instances governments have undercut the humanities by shifting funding away to the sciences and other areas considered to be of greater utilitarian value. In many departments and faculties enrolments have been declining, in the face of an increasingly inimical discourse about the relevance of the humanities compared to the sciences, technology and business related subjects, to graduate employability, and national socio-economic development. Underscoring these developments is a privileging of narrow pathways for students leading to professional and vocational qualifications, as opposed to the graduating of students who are well-rounded and possess the range of competencies, skills, knowledge and attitudes critical to their personal development, ambitions, and productive participation in society. While many of these issues and challenges have become more pronounced in the Caribbean over the last few decades, higher education institutions have tended to adopt uncoordinated piecemeal solutions rather than fundamental transformations needed to breathe new life into the humanities. This article offers some insights into reviving the humanities at The University of the West Indies (UWI), on the basis that

vibrancy in the humanities is critical to the overall health and well-being of regional societies and economies.

A review of the literature on the humanities reveals continuing strong support in some quarters for the view that the humanities constitute a vital asset to individual, social and economic development, and for nurturing character development and democratic values. The humanities provide alternative ways of assessing value in a world which is increasingly defining importance and worth in terms of financial or economic value. The humanities are widely regarded as being vital to building the range of soft skills which many employers deem to be lacking in today's graduates. These include the ability to write and communicate clearly, organise and evaluate ideas, critical thinking skills including the ability to think logically, creatively and understand and evaluate complex concepts and problems. Increasingly, studies have confirmed the value of humanities graduates to the society and economy.

At a more fundamental level the humanities deal with what makes us human, our uniqueness as individuals but also our collective identities, and how these change over time. The humanities cause us to reflect on, and seek to answer important questions such as: what is our purpose on earth, what is the meaning of life, what is right and what is wrong, and how do we decide such questions? They represent and span the totality of our humanity, and engage with the sciences, technology and other disciplines, to help us make sense of our existence. Yet, in many countries, humanities programmes in colleges and universities are under severe pressure and there is a growing perception that a qualification in the humanities will not do much good for graduates' job prospects. This is a matter of utmost importance given that students almost everywhere are increasingly having to absorb the cost of education at the tertiary level. Studies in the United States, United Kingdom and elsewhere show that humanities graduates often have good job prospects and competitive salaries but these realities seem not to have impacted hostile perceptions and narratives to the contrary.<sup>1</sup>

---

1. See, for example, Philip Kreager, *Humanities Graduates and the British Economy: The Hidden Impact*, <https://tinyurl.com/zyn7tmv>; and, George Anders, *You Can Do Anything: The Surprising Power of a "Useless" Liberal Arts Education* <http://www.humanities.uci.edu/SOH/magazine/strategic17/story1.php>.

Within the UWI, as indeed at many other universities, the term “crisis” is being used to describe the state of the humanities, and it seems that the imperatives for change have arguably never been stronger and numerous. At the UWI the emphasis within the Faculties of Humanities seems in some ways, to be more on surviving and less on stimulating new futures and engagement, underscored by vibrancy and strong sustainability and resilience frameworks. Some effort has been made at undertaking curricula and programme reforms but scarcity of resources is often cited by faculty as a major constraint. However, while it can be argued that the lack of resources can be a powerful deterrent to innovation, reform and progress, there are other critical factors that may explain the current plight of faculties and departments of humanities. These factors may include a broader range of issues linked to not adequately understanding the nature of the problem, and a lack of effective strategic planning to rectify and get to the heart of the challenges faced by the humanities.

Globally, more universities and even countries, have perceived the threat to their humanities programmes and have moved with speed, determination and clarity of purpose and vision, to the extent that this is possible in difficult financial and resource-scarce environments, to respond to the situation. Some humanities faculties, departments and researchers have adopted innovative thinking and approaches to enhance their relevance by making meaningful and appealing connections between the different subject areas and the major social, economic and other challenges of the twenty-first century. However, within the faculties of humanities at the UWI there remains an urgent need for more stimulating and relevant courses rooted in interdisciplinary fusions, and underscored by research of the same interdisciplinary nature, in order to more effectively engage regional development issues and challenges.

## Constructing a Brighter Future

The following suggestions and recommendations seek to chart a fresh start, or a major re-boot for the humanities departments at the UWI, rooted in an enhanced image of their public value; a reformed curriculum; more interdisciplinary teaching, research and partnerships; greater student choice;

better alignment of graduates' skills sets with labour market requirements; as well as closer and more innovative engagements with the major socio-economic and other challenges faced by the region:

1. *Faculty owning the challenge and imagining a bright and exciting future:* The current challenges faced by the humanities at the UWI can only be solved in the context of a multi-stakeholder partnership involving UWI leaders, faculty, students, governments, private sector and civil society, with additional aid and support of various international partners. However, it is of vital importance that faculty from the humanities departments take greater ownership and responsibility for addressing the many challenges.
2. *Greater emphasis on interdisciplinary and comparative approaches:* If the faculties of humanities at the UWI want to be more vibrant, innovative and impactful they must seek to eliminate artificial silos and build collaborative curricula bridges and fusions between the humanities and the other disciplines.
3. *Maximising the benefits of multi-modal learning:* The Faculties of Humanities should move aggressively to utilise the multi-modal (online and blended) learning modalities of the Open Campus (and other campuses) to help address the problem of small departments and small student registration numbers. This will require training for all humanities faculty so as to ensure their competence in delivering high quality online courses.
4. *Humanities and external stakeholders' communities:* Greater emphasis needs to be placed on significantly strengthening and harmonising, through a strategic framework and mutually beneficial interactive engagement at the levels of curriculum development and reform, policy formulation and practice, and research, faculties' relationship with their various stakeholders, including the private sector, communities, government and development partners.
5. *Strengthening the humanities research infrastructure and ecosystem:* It is necessary for the faculties of humanities to take the lead in articulating and energising a more well-integrated and developed humanities research infrastructure or ecosystem which networks in a more active and

participatory relationship with libraries, archives, museums, special collections holdings (in the private and public sector), and those of other disciplines such as medicine, architecture, etc.

6. *Reimagining and reforming the humanities curricula for labour market success:* Consideration should be given to revising, in a prioritised and staged manner, the curricula for humanities students need to ensure that they are more adequately prepared to be competitive in the labour market. This should involve some emphasis on the acquisition of additional quantitative skills and training in the use of relevant analytical programmes, exposure to broader social sciences research methods, as well as acquisition of foreign languages (such as, for instance, French, Spanish, Chinese and Arabic, among others) and business development, entrepreneurial, management, networking and public relations skills.
7. *Strengthening graduate student mentorship, academic advising and career guidance:* As the UWI aims to shorten the time span for the completion of doctoral degrees, it becomes imperative that graduate students be provided with the help and support they need to make the transition from a first or Masters to a doctoral degree, particularly in the first six months to a year.
8. *Valuing effective public relations and branding:* There is a need to distinguish the humanities identity as a core part of the UWI brand and family of faculties. One of the most powerful factors that can build up a unique brand and enhanced image of the UWI faculties of humanities will be the quality and uniqueness of the graduates they produce. It is also important that the faculties work cohesively and closely with the University's marketing departments to develop an effective multipronged public relations campaign which extols the practical and intrinsic value of the humanities, and their importance to individual and national success and identity.
9. *Laying solid foundations – building up humanities in the school system:* There is an urgent need for new thinking, reflection, and strategising with respect to redefining and significantly strengthening the relationship between the humanities in the UWI and other teacher-learning institutions, and

humanities teaching and learning in secondary schools, focusing on such areas as the curriculum, teacher training, and career advising for students.

10. *In-depth analysis of challenges and opportunities:* There is a urgent need for the UWI, led by a joint team from the Faculties of Humanities and comprising international experts from leading universities worldwide with strong humanities programmes to conduct an in-depth review and evaluation of the state of the humanities at the UWI, focusing on such issues as teaching and learning, research, and innovation in the humanities, as well as assessing the role and impact of the humanities on Caribbean socio-economic development.
11. *Funding the humanities into the future:* There is a need for the Faculties of Humanities at the UWI to develop an integrated funding strategy and model as the basis for their increased sustainability, vibrancy and support for departments, including offering more student bursaries and scholarships to needy students.

As with the university as a whole, respective faculties need more than ever to be vigilant and attuned to the needs and ambitions of their students and other stakeholders, as well as global trends which may either create new opportunities and possibilities or cause their demise. Given the struggles of many faculties of humanities worldwide, not least in the Caribbean, it is imperative that they do not succumb to malaise but instead take proactive measures based on their peculiar circumstances and international experience and best practice, to ensure their survival and growth even in the most difficult circumstances. Arguably, the need to be resilient and to birth new innovative ideas has perhaps never been greater for faculties of humanities at the UWI. Change is never easy and the road to successful recovery and growth may be fraught with pitfalls and obstacles but with a concerted collective effort these faculties can once again become the human face of the University and the soul of cultural vibrancy in the Caribbean.