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**The Value
of the Humanities in
Higher Education**
Perspectives from Hong
Kong

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Introduction: The Values of a Humanities Higher Education in Hong Kong

The report is an extensive analysis of the multifaceted values that a higher education in the humanities offers individuals, the society, and the economy as explored in the context of Hong Kong. Using both qualitative interview data with past humanities graduates and with senior humanities scholars, and quantitative graduate employment survey data, the report provides a fuller picture of the “value” of humanities degrees in relation to both the personal and emotional needs of the individual and the social and economic needs of Hong Kong. It offers an in-depth exploration of the current condition of the humanities in higher education in Hong Kong, including the issues and problems they face and the contributions they make in the eyes of graduates and practitioners.

Methodologically, the work on which this report is based was inspired by and partially modeled on a 2013 study by Philip Kreager of the Institute of Human Sciences at the University of Oxford entitled *Humanities Graduates and the British Economy: The Hidden Impact* (2013). This report (henceforth called the Oxford Report) uses empirical data to assess the impact of humanities education at the University of Oxford, and is divided, like our study, into quantitative and qualitative sections. The quantitative part shows Oxford graduates’ employment data and employment trends in key sectors of the British economy from 1960 to 1989. The qualitative part uses interviews with past Oxford humanities graduates to ask about career and life choices they made, and how their humanities education may or may not have influenced their life course. This part’s use of interview data with humanities graduates is based on the writers’ awareness that there is a need to “put students at the heart of the issue [by] documenting in depth graduates’ own views as to how and how well higher education has prepared them” (p. 52). This agenda makes the study unique among the plethora of existing studies, reports, articles, and books on the value of the humanities, which tend not to use empirical data systematically to represent students’ or graduates’ views. In emulating the methodology in our own report, we sought, to an even greater extent, to focus on elucidating the more individual values ascribed to humanities higher education expressed through graduates’ own narratives in their own voices, which, as will be seen, come

through in this report through numerous direct interview quotations even as we organized and summarized the interview data using thematic analysis.

Our report's qualitative data in Part I comprises interviews with 59 graduates who completed local humanities degree programs from 1995 to 2004. The focus for these is more on subjective constructions of value over the individual's lifetime, including personal, social, or economic contributions made by the individual. The format of the semi-structured interview we used enabled graduates to set and elaborate on their own emphases in describing what qualities and aspects of their humanities education were most beneficial to them in their careers and their lives.

The Oxford Report found specific skills that humanities graduates said they possessed due to their degree, and which had been useful to them in their careers over many years, including their competencies in "how to break things down," "careful listening," "recognising priorities among facts," "being able quickly to articulate and make clear choices," "thinking across different fields of knowledge," "good communication skills," "the ability to be creative with language on demand," and the possession of "mobile knowledge skills" (pp. 38–49). We also used the results of our interviews to assess what skills and what other benefits—directly instrumental to graduates' career or otherwise—graduates gained from humanities degree programs in Hong Kong, and how advantageous or not these had been to them. These interviews were essential in providing a more multifaceted picture of the "value" of a humanities degree.

Our report's quantitative portion in Part II comprises graduate survey data collected by three public universities in Hong Kong from 1995 to 2015, which detail the major career field graduates entered. It evidences the direct contribution humanities graduates make to the economy through the jobs they go on to fill immediately upon graduation. Here, along the same lines as the Oxford Report, we compared labor data for humanities graduates' job destinations with data on employment sectors for the Hong Kong economy as a whole to provide a picture of the contributions of humanities degrees to the economic needs and growth of Hong Kong in these two recent decades. We show what percentage of these humanities graduates went on to work in the major employment fields used by the government to categorize contributions to GDP.

In addition, as a complement to the graduate interviews in Part I, we conducted a second series of interviews with ten senior humanities practitioners based in Hong Kong in the present or in the past, asking for their understandings of what the humanities are, and what values the humanities and an education steeped in the humanities have for society in their minds. Each academic interviewed had useful perspectives on the humanities to share based on their decades of experience, ones which at times corresponded to the views held by graduates in striking ways.

However similar our methods, the Oxford Report, even in its analysis of the interviews, retains a very strong focus on economic benefits, while we sought expressly to look at a greater variety of values contributed by a humanities degree without necessarily translating all of them into economic benefits. In this aspect, the approach used in our study is in fact more similar to that of a recent, much longer, report, entitled the *Humanities World Report 2015*. Besides conducting an

extensive literature review on what has already been written about the value of the humanities in academic scholarship, the authors of this report interviewed 89 humanities scholars from 41 countries. Analyzing and integrating the data, they sought to concretize both the economic and non-economic values of the humanities. In terms of approach although not method, our study was closer to the *Humanities World Report 2015*, because although we make an economic argument for humanities education, we also greatly emphasize non-economic values from humanities graduates' narratives.

This study comes as numerous invaluable studies on the humanities in universities have been published in recent years by commentators, teachers, and academics who argue in different ways for the importance of the humanities, or who evaluate the significance of the humanities, primarily in the Anglo-American context (such as Belfiore and Upchurch, 2013; Small, 2013; Collini, 2012; Harpham, 2011; Nussbaum, 2010; and Menand, 2010). Such a need for a reconsideration of the humanities has come about because of changing educational conditions worldwide that have led to a much greater emphasis being placed on the instrumental or commercial benefits of higher education. The overall impact is that national educational departments and bureaus are increasingly concerned about the economic effects of government higher education policy. They pose fundamental questions about the benefits of higher education: how and what does higher education contribute to individuals' lives professionally and personally? How can we understand and analyze the impact of higher education on people's lives as a factor in national or regional economy and society? Should we continue to support the humanities as a social good when their practical contribution to the economy and the public good is less clear than is the contribution of other university sectors and faculties that are more explicitly career-oriented?

Empirical research of the type undertaken in this study allows for the systematic analysis of the value and contributions of humanities degree holders in Hong Kong. This has several benefits. It fills a gap in existing research on the benefits of humanities education which tends, in line with the hermeneutical paradigm of many of its subjects, not to be based on data collection but on the writer's perspectives. These are of course no less valid or important, but collecting and analyzing relevant data will help build a more rounded picture that can speak to both insiders and outsiders to the field. Empirical research can also support informed decision-making on the allocation of funding and resources by the government and other stakeholders in future. In addition, it can bridge the divide between the special emphasis in the humanities on individual growth and interpretative approaches (Parker, 2008, p. 87; Small, 2013, p. 57), and the more instrumental skills gained by graduates. Looking at how humanities graduates contribute to society allows us not to see these two sides as necessarily opposed. Indeed, what seems less immediately useful in humanities subjects may at various points of graduates' lives prove to be demonstrably instrumental after all. As we will see, such circular hermeneutics of what constitutes usefulness also emerge from the interview data in this study.

The two types of data used imply two different approaches to addressing the central question of what value humanities education in universities have for Hong Kong society. With them, we seek to create multi-perspectival answers to this question: one by looking macroscopically at the proportional contribution of humanities graduates to economic sectors in Hong Kong using graduate employment survey data, and the other by looking microscopically at the contribution of a humanities degree to people's careers and lives. The two types of data used will also be able to address each other's shortcomings and limitations. The quantitative data captures only information on graduates' first jobs and is not able to provide a longitudinal picture of the effects of studying a humanities degree, and works with a fixed notion of "value" as measurable contribution to Hong Kong's economic growth and development. The qualitative data is able to address the enduring significance, over the span of more than a decade, that a humanities degree holds for individuals in Hong Kong (Kreager, 2013, pp. 6–7). Although this is unable to be measured using a survey with fixed questions and categories, this is a vitally crucial aspect to the "value" of a humanities degree, which any study on this topic cannot afford to ignore. However, the interview data does not provide the objective, macroscopic picture that the survey data does. Far from obscuring the stark differences between these two types of data, or the challenges in consolidating their different natures in one study, we wish to emphasize and make use of these differences as able to address "value" using divergent epistemological frameworks. "Value" is not an objective term with a given set of criteria, and only by using these two approaches do we do sufficient justice to the complexity of the term. Therefore, although not even the two ways of addressing this term in this study are exhaustive, they will allow a sufficiently rounded view to speak to the two conceptions of "value" that this study works with, which will appeal to different stakeholders and parties in society.

Our study is relatively unique among existing studies on the value of the humanities in two distinct ways. The first one is obvious: none of the existing studies on the value of the humanities specifically discuss humanities education in Hong Kong. We do not wish to argue that the Hong Kong context does not share any commonalities with other places, and that studies elsewhere do not apply here—far from it, since our report's results at times resonate with findings from studies elsewhere, and we make reference to them in our report. However, Hong Kong is of course distinctive enough economically and culturally to deserve its own study, and it has a large enough higher education sector and student body to warrant one. 1,927 students took arts and humanities subjects (12%) out of a total publicly funded undergraduate student intake for the 1994/95 academic year of 15,738. Out of a total publicly funded undergraduate student intake of 17,965 for the 2014/15 academic year, 2,392 took arts and humanities subjects (13%).¹ The percentages for humanities undergraduates in Hong Kong have therefore remained quite stable in Hong Kong across the twenty-year period while they have fallen elsewhere in the

¹Such numbers are available from the University Grants Committee statistics website at <<https://cdf.ugc.edu.hk/cdf/statEntry.action?language=EN>>.

world. But also, more importantly, with the exception of the Oxford Report—which is a very short report focusing on one university—and the *Humanities World Report 2015*, no book-length studies, as far as we could discover, conducted such extensive interviews with graduates as we did, and allowed their voices to be heard to the extent that our report, in its frequent use of quotes from the interviews, does; most of them were written from the perspectives of humanities educators.

We see this as the core strength and uniqueness of this report. It may well be true that what humanities educators say about the value of the humanities is very accurate, but even if graduates largely agree on what they say about the benefits of a humanities education (which our study partially confirms), their own descriptions, in their own words, of their post-graduation life journeys reveal certain aspects that humanities educators are not fully in the know about and aspects that could usefully inform how they conduct humanities education. This is indeed something the report will discuss later, after presenting the results: how we can use what the graduates said in their interviews to shape parts of the education humanities practitioners provide.

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