

Recognising the Importance of the Humanities

Abstract

This article discusses the importance of the humanities, arts and social sciences (HASS) subjects, exploring their benefits in education as well as their wider, “real-world” applications, such as the development of critical thinking skills. The challenges to these subjects are explored across each stage of education, with a focus on the ongoing concerns in teaching circles about curriculum narrowing. The perspectives of teachers are compared with data from expert literature, reaching the conclusion that curriculum narrowing and the undervaluation of HASS subjects are significant challenges in education.

Humanities, Arts and Social Sciences (HASS) in the Curriculum

Until Key Stage 3 (year 7 – 9), “foundation subjects” including the HASS subjects are required by the national curriculum in England (DfE, 2014). At Key Stage 4 (year 10 – 11), the national curriculum states that maintained schools must offer students the opportunity to study at least one course in each of the following areas:

- The arts, “comprising art and design, music, dance, drama and media arts”
- Design and technology
- The humanities, “comprising geography and history”
- Modern foreign languages

It is also required that state schools “teach religious education to pupils at every key stage”.

It is worth noting that some subjects fall under more than one category of the HASS umbrella, depending on the institution. For example, geography is often considered a social science, rather than a humanity. However, the HASS subjects share many common characteristics, which set them apart from science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM). These unique benefits are discussed below.

The Benefits of HASS Subjects

The HASS subjects develop important skills that are needed for success in real-world situations, including in employment. There is evidence that degrees in HASS subjects are linked to positions of **leadership** in a range of professional settings. In 2015, research by the British Council found that out of a sample of 1700 people from 30 countries, 55 % of those in positions of leadership had “either a social sciences ... or humanities bachelor’s

degree” (Blochinger, 2015). The same report found an interesting difference between leaders above and below the age of 45: “Younger leaders ... were more likely to have a social science or humanities background, while those over 45 were more likely to have studied ... STEM”. This would suggest that the skills that are developed while studying HASS subjects are becoming increasingly valued in leadership.

So why are these subjects so good at setting people up for employment? The key is in the skills that HASS students develop. One of these skills is **critical thinking**, the skill we integrate within all our lessons at Endoxa Learning. (To read more about which subjects develop critical thinking, [click here](#).) The skill of critical thinking is applicable to many different contexts. However, being able to develop this skill and use it successfully is “very much dependent on domain knowledge and practice” (Willingham, 2008, p. 22). So, learning to be a good critical thinker depends on learning it through practice in particular contexts. Dumitru (2019) argues that the arts, humanities and cultural studies are the best way of achieving this. The author argues that while learning about particular historical events or undertaking literature analysis will not make a student more employable, performing tasks like this does allow students to develop “cognitive maturity” and critical thinking abilities.

Other skills that have been identified in HASS graduates include the following (Lyonette et al., 2017):

- Ability to learn new skills
- Communication
- Creativity
- Independence and initiative
- Innovation
- Literacy
- Persistence
- Personal responsibility
- Teamwork
- Time management

Developing skills like critical thinking allows professionals to succeed in the world of employment, even if their career path takes them in unexpected directions. Ruggeri (2019) discusses a LinkedIn survey that found that 40 % of people were considering changing careers, especially in the case of younger professionals. The article goes on to argue that this is why the transferable skills gained from humanities subjects are so important. Professionals who move to new careers need not worry about starting from scratch or being unsuited to other industries, because they have skills that are important across the working world. Furthermore, many HASS graduates go into careers that are not directly related to their degrees, but they are able to adapt quickly to these new fields due to the wealth of transferable skills that they acquired during education (Lyonette et al., 2017). Likewise, many of today’s challenges require an interdisciplinary approach. For example, challenges like poverty and climate change must be addressed through the integration of HASS subjects with the knowledge produced by STEM subjects, so the

existence of a workforce with expertise in HASS subjects is essential (Bear and Skorton, 2019).

Teachers are Noticing Curriculum Narrowing

The HASS subjects have an important role in developing people as citizens, but their value is not always reflected in the curriculum. In recent years, teachers and education experts have raised concern about the process of **curriculum narrowing**, where the breadth of subjects offered by education providers is reduced by cutting “non-core subjects” from the curriculum. In a study of primary schools in the UK, one headteacher said that “we are too busy being judged on maths and English”, with “little time to teach history and geography” (Barnes and Scoffham, 2017, p. 301). Similarly, another headteacher complained of the difficulty “fitting it all in” within the curriculum (ibid., p. 302). Importantly, schools value HASS subjects and try hard to reflect this within their curricula, but this is prevented due to external pressure for students to do well in the “core” subjects of maths, science and literacy.

Evidence of Curriculum Narrowing

Barnes and Scoffham (ibid.) found that curriculum narrowing is occurring in primary schools, with humanities subjects experiencing the squeeze. This process is linked to a combination of insufficient access to teacher training, policy constraints and a shift in the curriculum toward “knowledge at the expense of understanding and experience” (ibid., p 306).

The trend is not limited to primary schools. Roberts (2021) found that most humanities A-Level subjects have seen a decrease in take-up since 2016, which cannot be explained by the decrease in 18-year-old students. In the Scottish curriculum, a reduced uptake of “non-core subjects, such as modern languages, arts, humanities and technology” has been observed at lower school levels since the introduction of new National Qualifications (Priestley and Shapira, 2017, p. 1). Crucially, this low uptake has led to a lack of students with experience in these subjects, leading to a reduced uptake throughout the entire school system. Furthermore, the Office for Students (OfS, 2021) has confirmed that a subsidy “designed to help universities and colleges deliver [expensive] subjects” will be reduced by 50 % for arts subjects in higher education.

However, there is some positive news. Bear and Skorton (2019) found that higher education in the US is experiencing rejuvenated emphasis on the integration of a broad range of subjects, especially through the provision of courses that focus on global challenges like climate change and poverty.

In the UK, the challenge of curriculum narrowing is recognised by education authorities and there have been efforts to prevent or reduce it. For example, Ofsted (2019a) expresses a strong stance on preventing curriculum narrowing, with curriculum breadth included within the school inspection handbook (Ofsted, 2021b). They state that “pupils continue to take a broad range of subjects, including the arts, at key stage 4” (Ofsted, 2021a). However, their school inspection update (Ofsted, 2019b, p. 11) states that “curricular breadth and balance are less important at [Key Stage 1]”.

Nevertheless, Ofsted does recognise that curriculum narrowing is a challenge, especially at Key Stages 2 and 3 and with “a disproportionately negative effect on the most disadvantaged pupils” (Ofsted, 2019b). A Teacher Tapp (2017) survey found that Amanda Spielman’s promise that Ofsted will focus more on the curriculum has a positive response from over 60 % of secondary teachers. However, 40 % of primary teachers believed that the curriculum “is often overlooked, but Ofsted won’t help”. This suggests that teachers wish for greater priority to be given to curricula in general, but also that there is some lack of trust in the achievement of this goal.

What Causes Curriculum Narrowing?

In the USA, an increased emphasis on mathematics and reading ability, for which achievement levels are heavily examined and low achievement is penalised, has caused schools to reduce their focus on other subjects, including HASS (Berliner, 2011). A similar pressure for achievement in high-stakes testing has led to concerns about the UK curriculum, as illustrated in the previous section (ibid.). Furthermore, Harlen (2007) found that 13 school days are taken up by testing and practicing for tests at Year 6, which leaves less time for the teaching of a broad curriculum. A Tes (2018) investigation found that “GCSE-style tests” are being marketed to KS3 by major exam boards, putting high pressure on students and schools to achieve. This move has been criticised by the Ofsted chief inspector as “cutting down children’s exposure to a full, rich curriculum and reinforc[ing] the idea that targets, predictions and data points are more important than the substance of education” (ibid.).

A similar problem is being seen at higher education, which is argued to be “viewed as a path for workforce preparation best pursued through a narrowing curriculum” (Bear and Skorton, 2019, p. 62). Essentially, pressure on educational institutions to produce high-achieving students has shifted the focus of these providers from broad skills and knowledge to exam success and the resulting progression through the education system. This supports widely held views that the emphasis on high-stakes testing is negatively affecting curriculum breadth and the provision of “non-core” subjects.

What is to be Done?

It is clear that curriculum narrowing is a problem in the UK and in other countries due to the pressure faced by education providers to achieve in high-stakes testing that is focussed on a limited number of subjects. This produces a lack of experience in HASS subjects at lower levels, driving low take-up at higher levels. There is no doubt that this imbalance needs to be addressed in a way that addresses each education level. Not doing this risks producing generations of students inexperienced in critical thinking and lacking other transferable skills.

The argument over curriculum narrowing cannot be won by talking about subject knowledge in HASS subjects. As everyone agrees, knowing the date of the Battle of Waterloo is not important for employability, but transferable skills are. So part of the approach must include a curriculum emphasis on building the unique skills that are gained from HASS subjects, such as critical thinking.

At Endoxa Learning, HASS and vocational subjects are at the heart of our approach. We help develop strong critical thinkers, who can take these skills from subjects like religious education, geography or business and use them in the wider world. Our mission is to enable everyone to think critically, and this starts with the teaching of the subjects that nurture this skill.

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